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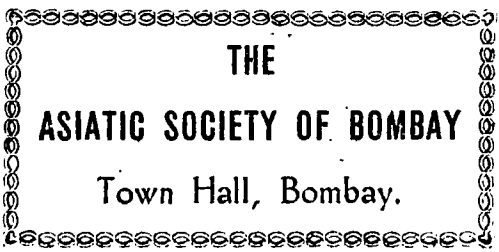

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Cupid and Cartridges

Cupid and Cartridges

BY

AUBREY O'BRIEN

AND

REGINALD BOLSTER

38141

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TO

W. O'B.,

THE MASKED MEMBER OF OUR CONSPIRACY, AND OUR CREDITOR FOR MUCH KINDLY CRITICISM, VALUED INSPIRATION, AND UNSPARING LABOUR.

A. O'B.

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Cupid and Cartridges.

CHAPTER I.

A QUICKSAND.

"You can cut off both my ears if we don't have a great hunt," said Bahadur Khan to us.

"Well, that's a sporting offer," I laughed, "but we haven't much luck at present. Eh?"

Bahadur Khan smiled deprecatingly. He was a bluff Pathan Chief with a fine manly face and a robust figure already acquiring in early middle age that suggestion of corpulence which to the Oriental is inseparable from dignity.

"May you and your children live," he said. "This is Friday: one ought never to start a journey on Friday."

"Well, the sport begins to-morrow, Khan Sahib," I answered. "Let us hope it will be good; to-day does not matter."

"Well, Friday or no Friday, it is a beastly day to-day," chipped in Miles Vernon.

And so it was. The air was full of a yellowish haze, and the wind blew incessantly, stirring up the sand in clouds.

Vernon and I were riding with an unusually large attendance of squires and squireens from all parts of the countryside. These had joined us at our last camp on our side of the Indus, while contingents were expected from many villages far and near. The reason for this gathering was that we were bound for a joint drive of pig in the jungles that stretch between our district of Hazratabad and the adjoining one of Sialgarh.

Pig are vermin that do an immense amount of damage, and, as the thickness of the jungles and the abundance of the quicksands and creeks of the Indus prohibit the glorious sport of pig-sticking, the only way to keep piggy down is to drive him at intervals.

There are two seasons for this. In November the flood waters of the mighty Indus have subsided to their lowest winter level, and the new growths are still small. Later, the jungle grows apace, and soon the denser parts become almost impenetrable. But when the new year begins, rushes are cut for house roofs, tamarisks for firewood and for fan handles, and the longest reeds with their delicate crowned heads come down to be matted in a hundred different forms. This done, the woods are fired and thinned, and the greater part of the growths that spring up so quickly and luxuriantly is destroyed. Thus the best season comes at the end of February and in March.

This was, however, the opening Meet of the

November season, and we had been invited by Dick Benson, the Collector of Sialgarh, to join him in his camp at Bet Arhai. He was to await us there with his contingent of sportsmen.

"How many net-men has Hazratabad brought?" I said to Bahadur Khan.

His younger brother, Sher Mahommed, intervened. "I have seen to it myself, and we shall have fifty of them."

Sher Mahommed was a long lean figure of a man, with aquiline features of a somewhat ascetic type, and the dreamy eyes of the opium eater, and formed a queer contrast to his frank and blustering brother.

Enthusiast for all kinds of sport, and a magnificent tent-pegger in his day, he had, like so many other fine fellows of the riverain, taken to drugs to counteract the agues and fever bred in the marshes, and was only half sane. His chief weakness was piety of an unwise type, and the great saints of the Western Punjab found him a generous suppliant at their shrines.

His fad at the present moment was a harmless one, and was confined to setting himself up as the manager of all sporting enterprises. This was no bad quality in him, for, though the public needed little encouragement to turn up for such hunts on camels, horses, or on foot, with dogs to seize or nets to entangle, the news that the Khan Sahib was entertaining brought in stragglers and encouraged the rest.

All the way along the ride we were passing the sportsmen who were to help us. On foot, carrying

nets of strong reed fibre and stout staves, were the Labanas, the Mahtams, and the Kehals. All were members of hunting tribes, and all possessed religions more or less varying from, but founded on, the tenets of the great creeds in their neighbourhood. The Labanas are semi-Sikhs who wear their hair in Sikh fashion, but worship at the neighbouring Mahommedan shrines, and choose the saints of Islam as their Pirs or spiritual advisers. The Mahtams are Mahommedans to all intent, but are disapproved of by their more orthodox neighbours, because they are willing to eat the unclean thing when killed in these drives. Kéhals are Mahommedanised Hindus, or Hinduised Mahommedans, holding the tenets taken from both religions, but obnoxious to those of both creeds because nothing comes amiss to them, whether pig or porpoise, crocodile or iguana.

In Vernon and myself two-thirds of the European population of Hazratabad were riding with the squires. The other third consisted of Frank Rutherford, the policeman, who had failed to join us at the last moment..

He had been compelled to start at scant notice for the scene of a murder by an aggrieved husband, which had been rendered more complex by the fact that public opinion was in favour of the murderer. Our rural population is still in that uncivilised stage which considers that the right of man over woman should be absolute, and resents our interference between a man and what should be, they think, his own property.

We were sorry to lose Rutherford, for, despite

the somewhat languid manner that makes him seem one of the class of men that are "born tired," he excels at everything at which he really exerts himself, and is a fine shot and good company.

It was a long march to the place where our camp was to be,—a good thirty miles of a ride. But I am a light weight, and manage to keep pretty fit, and Vernon tells me that it is not for nothing that I have acquired the nickname of the Weasel in the province. As for Vernon himself, he is a big slow man who played Forward at Rugger, and rowed No. 5 in his boat at College. He needs good ponies to carry him, and rides, as he does most other things, by sheer strength and without much grace. We therefore make light of such distances in Hazratabad.

I was fond of Miles Vernon. At school and college his somewhat bucolic manner earned him the nickname of Giles, a perversion of his proper Christian name; but underneath this stolidity lay many good qualities. Not the least of these in a constant companion in a lonely district was a capacity to enjoy both life and a joke. We were friends from the day when, as my newly-joined assistant on his very first inspection in my company, he rocked in his saddle with helpless laughter at a toss which I took at a slow walk over a stumbling pony's nose,—the picture of the entire native portion of my following, dismounted, feeling for broken bones, and felicitating me on my escape, being more than his gravity could stand.

On we travelled in the driving dust. A ride through the riverain is usually a great delight.

Long stretches of tamarisk brake there are, and mile upon mile of poplar thicket with the giant reed growing between. Here and there one comes suddenly upon thriving fields of wheat and gram, where the geese feed at their appointed time, and from which, on your approach, the beautiful black partridge rises with whirring wings. At intervals, one passes creeks and water pockets that the great river has left for the duck to forage in, and, behind all, is the rugged outline of the Suleiman Hills. But to-day was Friday, and by accident as unlucky as the natives suppose it to be, and we were not taking much stock of the dust-blurred scene.

The wind was blowing its worst as we crossed the last strip of mud flat which lay between us and the cumbrous ferry-boats. There were two of them, just such barks as carried Alexander in the past. We scrambled on to the poop, and looked back on to the crowd assembled by the boats or streaming across the flats towards them.

"What a circus!" chuckled Miles gleefully.

The whole thing was new to him, and he possessed strongly the faculties of observation and appreciation. It was indeed a wonderful turn-out. The dogs were strange and weird: every variety of cross there was, and nothing pure-bred. The ragged owners, however, were very proud of their charges, and were prepared on the slightest provocation to descant on their stoutness and prowess.

Then there was every kind of horse-flesh, from the high-class produce of the sires that a benevolent Government supplies to improve the local breed,

down to the fruit of a mesalliance between a crofter's drab and the weed kept by a village menial.

And the riders were just as varied as the horses. Sturdy Bahadur Khan had a gold-embroidered coat of blue broadcloth. The lean figure of his brother was wrapped in a sheepskin garment, the skin side out and finely embroidered, smartened by a bright scarf of great length wound round shoulders and waist. All the bigger men wore the great rope puggarees of the Western Punjab, but some of the poorer folk had quaint tea-cosy hats of bright wadded chintz, framing the face like a helmet. The clothing of all was white, or, at least, was intended to be so, but it varied from the snowy fine linen of the chieftains to the peasant's rough home-woven cottons which had long ago lost their primary hue.

Our attendants embarked as many horses as they could possibly cram into our vessel.

"Come up, Dul-Dul, my darling, what ails you?" said one horseman, as his pony, jibbing at the cruel thorn bit, showed a disinclination to get in.

"God's slaughter strike you, Baksha," broke out one of those already in the boat to another, as the latter's nag, a flamboyant cream-coloured country-bred, with saddle and bridle gaily worked with gold thread on leather, started kicking to the great annoyance of the other horses. "Look to this son of sin of yours. He will have us all destroyed."

"Look to yourself," replied Baksha shortly. "I am killed with holding him."

Some of the remaining men crammed their horses into the second ferry-boat, while the others composed

themselves to sleep in the driving sand for the hour and a half that must elapse before the boats could return.

Miles and I seated ourselves on a string bed on the poop, somewhat bothered by the steersman who had to work the great rudder behind, which he did by leaning heavily, alternately, on two stout poles connected by a rope which stretched in front of us. Mamdu had laid enamelled iron plates on a second bed, and had a welcome lunch ready for us.

He was a queer character that I had picked up as a stop-gap table servant, and whom I had never got rid of because of his very quaintness. He was a stumpy, squat creature with a small straggly beard, and talked incessantly, and to himself if alone; he had, moreover, the virtue of unfailing cheerfulness,—no mean merit in a country full of trials to the pessimist, and especially valuable in the servant of sportsmen, who are apt to demand meals at all hours and in all kinds of places.

He popped up and down from the cramped hen-coop below, which served him as a kitchen, but was also the cabin and dwelling-place of the five boatmen.

We had a healthy meal suitable to the distance we had covered: river fish extremely full of forked and jagged bones, with the inevitable anchovy sauce. A couple of white-eyed pochards shot two days before, followed by pudding, cheese, and fruit. It is true that the sand pervaded everything, and that our eyes smarted so that Vernon nearly choked himself with a fish-bone. The wind blew a chill blast on

the roast duck, and turned it cold before we were half way through; but what do trifles such as these weigh against the hunger of a twenty-five mile ride?

Our guns lay by our sides, and our waists were girt by belts each carrying twenty cartridges in clips.

It was Mamdu, popping up with roast apples, who spoke.

"See the geese."

We did see the geese, beating southwards towards Sind against the gale, and owing to the haze of the dust-storm they did not see or hear us till the last moment. They rose rapidly, but late enough to help their own disaster. We each got one.

"I got the one behind the bird I fired at," exclaimed Vernon.

"Yes," I replied. "I can quite imagine that in this light. It is lucky they did not keep dead on. I, like you, shot badly behind with my first barrel, and only threw on the lead with the second. These large birds are terribly deceptive in pace."

"What about Friday now, Khan Sahib?" called out Vernon to Bahadur Khan who was standing by the oarsmen at the other end of the boat.

"God is great. God grant you good health and fortune," was the rather cryptic reply of the jovial squire.

When you have been accustomed for generations to consider Friday as an inauspicious day for sporting enterprises, it does not do to challenge Fate by applauding too loudly any unexpected success.

Meanwhile, Sher Mahommed was shouting direc-

tions to a boatman who had plunged naked into the water, and was retrieving the floating birds. By this time we were out of the main channel, and soon got into difficulties with the wind which pressed us on to the shallows. All the boatmen poled together on the land side with twelve-feet staves, but, nevertheless, we were driven on to shore two hundred yards below the landing-stage.

"Can't the horses jump out here?" said Vernon. "There is only a foot of water. We can be carried."

"Quicksand, *Sahib*," said a boatman.

"There is stickphast mud below the water," I said, "so stick tight, Vernon, and smoke. We must be hauled up."

The boatmen all scrambled overboard and harnessed themselves to a rope. They had nothing but their shirts on,—scant wear for a chilly day. But when one has only one change of garments it is well to keep that dry.

At last we were dragged up to the landing-stage, and got out gladly. The horses were induced to disembark. Mamdu had his bundle of cooking-pots ready packed up, and was soon on the back of my riding-camel, which he had had the sense to send across in one of the previous trips made by the boats.

Sher Mahommed, having ascertained the exact amount of tip which we gave to the boatmen, ostentatiously gave them all double the amount.

"Why don't you shut the blighter up?" said Vernon.

"What is the good?" I answered. "He is too old to learn wisdom."

Sixteen horses only had been crammed into the two boats, so we rode on, a diminished band. Some of the footmen with dogs had been with us on board. We asked the names of some of their charges.

"This is Neli (Nellie), and this is Fani (Fanny)," said a grubby dwarfish youth with a roguish face, pointing to a pair of heavy mongrel bitches with close-cropped ears, equally ugly, and showing a strong strain of bull.

"They are devils to tackle, and fight with one another in the off season for all that they are sisters, just to keep themselves in practice."

"This is Jacks," said a long lean ruffian in a black and yellow shawl, jealous of the affection that we were paying the rival dogs, indicating a long shaggy dog remotely resembling a deer-hound. "He is a lion for courage and a leopard for speed."

Bahadur Khan pointed out with pride a great white lurcher of the most nondescript kind. "That is Bagla, the Paddy Bird. He has caught several pig and boars too, single-handed."

"Good luck to you with him," I said. "Where did you get him?"

"I sent a hundred miles into the Khattak Hills on news of him, and paid one hundred and fifty rupees."

"Whew!" said Vernon, "a tenner for a lurcher! What queer folk these gentry are!"

"Why did you pay so much, Bahadur Khan?" I asked.

"Ha! ha!" laughed Mallik Massu, a bulky great grazier from the adjoining desert. "He did that to

best Mamdu Khan, Hinjra, who thinks so much of his 'bully dog' Marker."

Bahadur Khan's jovial face lit up. "How are your cows and sheep, Massu?" was his *riposte*. "I hope they are gravid in plenty this year. You are somewhat that way yourself."

Loud guffaws greeted this sally, for Massu's figure is a comfortable one.

Vernon and I had to engage in serious conversation of our own to avoid the appearance of interest in the verbal warfare that followed. Our Jats and Pathans are not of the most refined.

"If the going were not so atrociously bad," I said to Vernon, "one could cut short a bit of chatter like this by putting on the pace, but it is impossible to get away from garrulous friends here."

We were then crossing a mile-wide stretch of pure sand, which represented last year's bed of the river.

The creek in front, about three hundred yards wide, was all there was to show that the main stream had been in the neighbourhood so recently. The sand was all on the move with the strong wind, which was fortunately at our back, and we dared not travel too fast for fear of missing the little heaps which serve the purpose of road delineation in the river-bed.

At last we reached the bank of the creek. The sand blew in gusts across, and it was difficult to see the tamarisk twigs which were stuck in at intervals in the water to mark the crossing.

"What are you checking for?" asked Vernon. "Let's get out of this sand and grit."

But I had been for years on or near the Indus,

and had a wholesome respect for it which subsequent events amply justified.

I waited for a lead by one of the local men. Bahadur Khan, still stinging from the last repartee of Mallik Massu, whose plump cheerfulness did not prevent his having a sharp edge to his tongue, pushed his black horse into the stream. Vernon followed, and my old chestnut, despite my reluctance to go fast, would not be kept from going his own pace and closing on to them.

We pressed on, drawing our feet up to keep them above the deepening water, till we could dimly see a bank about sixty yards off. As we made towards it we suddenly noticed that the tamarisk line had ceased.

"Stop a second and I will see if it is shallow enough to cross to that bank," shouted Bahadur Khan, his beard on his shoulder.

We checked where we were, while the Chief pushed on. For a moment he got low in the water, but another pace took him again into the shallows. He was all right, but suddenly, as we watched him, our horses started to plunge.

We were standing on a quicksand!

"Bismillah!" called out Sher Mahommed behind us. "Turn back at once."

But the warning came too late. The surface was just of a consistency to bear us when moving, but once we stopped the horses' hoofs began to sink into the mud, much to the distraction of the animals.

Plunge! plunge! went our nags amidst much confusion, and in a few seconds I found myself in the water, with Vernon in a similar plight close to me.

For a time we could neither of us think of our own mishap for laughter at seeing the massive form of Mallik Massu, who, still holding the reins of his frightened animal, floated on the water enveloped in his voluminous white cotton garments.

Fortunately, the quicksand was not a bad one, and once our weight was off the ponies, they could get clear. Three retainers leapt off, plunged into the stream, and took them over, but we had to wade a considerable distance on the right path, which had now been discovered, before we reached the other bank.

"Well, this is a regular Friday to you, Mallik Massu," I said, as cheerily as I could, to the stout old fellow whose ample cottons clung tightly to his portly figure.

"Not at all," he replied. "To be honoured by a ducking in the company of the great makes the day a festal occasion."

"Well, Massu is a terrible old courtier," put in Vernon; "but pretty speeches won't get us dry. Let's keep ourselves warm by riding."

Ours was not a pleasant plight certainly, for the wind was blowing a hurricane, and the sun was obscured with clouds and sand. We had a clear three miles to go on a path cut through reed thicket and across newly-ploughed fields, with nothing to stop us, so we clapped heels to our nags, and never drew rein till we reached the long row of white tents that marked our combined camps.

CHAPTER II.

IN CAMP.

DICK BENSON, sturdy, thick-set, and red-haired, emerged from his tent at the clatter of our arrival, and, after some words of commiseration, sent us off to change and return to tea.

As we passed the long row of tents in our wet and mud-stained garments, and especially as we neared the second one, in the reed-curtained verandah of which ladies were dimly visible, we were humorously conscious that we did not cut the best of figures. We were not sorry to get a chance of making ourselves more presentable before making their acquaintance.

I called for Vernon after a short time, and, not getting an answer, went into his tent. He was almost dressed, but was standing in his solid, stolid manner before the glass, wondering which of his few decent ties would suit the occasion. I laughed at him, but he explained with solemnity that the position required care as he had seen no lady for the last eleven months — since the last Christmas week, in fact.

We got into the tent which served for both

drawing- and dining-room, and found there Benson with his wife and a charming girl who, I knew, must be Barbara Waynfleete, Mrs Benson's sister. My dry old bachelor's heart beat for a moment strangely at a remembrance her ripe young beauty stirred. Just such honest brown eyes had belonged to Kitty, the girl who was to have been my wife, had not a terrible riding accident on a cliff road in the hills taken her from me.

Benson introduced Vernon to his wife, and both of us to Miss Waynfleete, and I, noticing the look of frank admiration in the lad's eyes, left him to talk to the young lady, whilst I sat down by Mrs Benson, a dear, kindly little woman whom everybody liked.

"And where is Humpie?" I asked.

"Oh! he is with his nurse just now, but he is sure to come in to plague you for a few minutes presently. He has a lively recollection of your face-making skill."

Humpie, a chubby-cheeked urchin of about three, came in at this moment, but I found myself at once cut out by Miles, who instituted the new and glorious game of putting him on the sloping awning over the tent door, and letting him slide down, a proceeding which took place amid shrieks of joyous laughter from the small man. Miss Waynfleete looked on smiling, and then increased Humpie's delight by trying to tickle him from the other side. Little Mrs Benson presently carried off her boisterous youngster, and her sister led us on to talk of our day.

She had the gift, all too dangerous when allied to youth and beauty, of being keenly interested in whatever interested those to whom she was talking. Also she possessed the art of finding out what it best pleased one to talk about, and of listening and commenting intelligently and brightly. And her own interest was real, not feigned, because she was of those who can enjoy keenly the small as well as the great things of everyday happening.

She was much impressed with our adventure of the quicksand.

"I wondered why Dick has once or twice warned me never to ride without a sort of scout in front. Men don't seem to have time out here to give us reasons for the various bits of advice they hurriedly bestow. May told me that she used to be quite pleased by what she thought was Dick's solicitude for her safety when she first used to shoot with him. He was always calling out to her to ride slowly when near water, and she imagined it was for fear she should ride into bogs and things, whereas it was only lest she should put up duck."

"I am glad you don't shoot, Miss Waynfleete," put in Miles irrelevantly.

"Why?" calmly queried the young lady. "You don't object to ladies riding, do you?"

"No," said Miles, "of course not."

"Why 'of course not'?" went on the girl with a gleam of mischievous humour. "How is shooting so very different from riding? Why shouldn't a girl become as good a shot as a man with equal practice?"

Vernon hastened to explain what, of course, Miss Barbara knew all the time, that he didn't mean that ladies mightn't shoot just as well, but that he somehow didn't think it was the right sort of thing for them to do. He is the sort of man who holds sound opinions but is not able to justify them by argument, and he seemed already to be rather confused and sorry that he had started the topic.

But Miss Barbara, who, I was to know later, was really as tender-hearted as any woman alive, would have it that Miles had already become penetrated with the notions of a country which sells its women, and denies them most of the rights and amenities of life.

Here Benson interposed.

"You can always get a rise out of my sister-in-law by getting her on the subject of Woman's Rights. We were talking about dentists' bills one day and she told me she had just had one of £20. 'It does seem a lot,' I said. 'Why, in this country you can buy a lady outright for that amount.' She has never really forgiven me since."

"The real truth," I rejoined, "of the suffragette movement is that people in England lead such sheltered lives that they are able to forget that there are times when only men count in a crisis of the State. We out here near the border live in an atmosphere where the strong man armed is the important figure in society, and happy is the man who has his quiver full of sons, that he may speak to the enemy within the gate."

"I could not understand till long after," said Mrs Benson, "why the natives of our district were so excited when Humpie was born, because he was a boy. We had crowds of people rushing up to offer congratulations."

"Yes," added Benson. "And Diwan Tuhi Mull came up to the garden, fixed twenty-one bombs in position, and had fired off seven rounds of his salvo of felicitation before I could get out and check him. He was not much affected by the idea that in England we put down straw in the street to keep the mother quiet and at rest."

"And to think that if it had been a girl, only an occasional educated pleader would have ventured half a word of hope that the mother was well, without reference to the child," I added.

Benson here turned the topic on to our friend Mallik Massu and our late adventure, and then we discussed the retinue Benson had brought and the prospects of sport.

"Shahbaz Khan and Ghulam Haider are both here," Benson said, "and have each brought very powerful contingents. It is something to have competition."

The talk then turned to the misdeeds of some of our affable native gentlemen, Benson and I capping each other's stories alternately.

It is unfortunate that Indian officials should have to see so much of native life from the magisterial point of view.

"How strange it all is!" said Mrs Benson, struck by one particular story. "It is so difficult

to think of you all consorting with men whom you know to be ruffians."

"Oh, well! they are good fellows in many other ways," I pleaded,—"better than some churchwardens, if we knew all. It is not as bad as on the frontier, where some of an officer's best friends are known to have a dozen murders on their consciences."

"It seems a horrible notion to be obliged to make friends of murderers," said Miss Waynfleete. "It is simply encouraging crime."

"Well, you see," said Benson, "what one understands as crimes are crimes against the State, and the men referred to have merely settled their own disputes across the border, outside our jurisdiction."

"Well, I suppose," said the girl, as she got up to go with her sister,—"I suppose one gets used to these things in time, but they are distinctly puzzling at first."

Left to ourselves, we strolled up and down outside, discussing "shop" to our heart's content until dinner-time.

Afterwards, we chatted of the delights of England to Miss Waynfleete, who posted us up about all the latest plays, and the changes since we were last at home.

We dispersed fairly early, in view of the day's sport to follow.

Next morning the storm had passed off, as is so frequently the case in these arid regions, without the fall of a drop of rain, and the sky was clear and fine.

Vernon and I each received formal visits before breakfast from the two principal chiefs of Benson's district, Shahbaz Khan, Jaskani, and Ghulam Haider Khan, Rind, and from the Pir Sahib, Ali Nur, a religious personage of considerable importance in the neighbourhood.

The former were chiefs over tribes of some standing, and still retained, even under our levelling rule, great influence over their uncivilised tribesmen. The Pir Sahib was an old Saiyad, a descendant of the Prophet, of great sanctity and decidedly sporting proclivities.

We watched our notables arrive from the door of our tents.

First came the holy man, extending a priestly blessing to all and sundry of his people. He was a burly man of fifty, with a square white beard and pleasant features, simply dressed, his great white turban surmounting a drab coat, and voluminous Turkish trousers of plain white cotton.

It was interesting to watch the attitude of the assembly towards him. Some touched his feet, some ran at his stirrup, but, to mark the advantage of official position in mere mundane affairs, a young orderly of the office was favoured with an embrace, as the Pontiff dismounted. It was not till his blood was warmed afterwards by the excitement of the chase that we heard him lavishing on his followers all the resources of an unrivalled vocabulary of abuse, —abuse that not only curled round their consciences like a whip, but seared, as with a red-hot iron, the inner life of their female relations.

Next arrived Shahbaz, the King Falcon, a dapper young man, dressed in a coat of a tender shade of blue-grey, built by a fashionable tailor of the capital. A pretty silk turban with a conical gold cap under it, and English patent leather boots, made up an ensemble which he retained for the three days of the shoot. The costume appeared hardly suitable to the sport before us, but he always affected the airs and graces of a dandy. On seeing him, I remembered the words of bitter-tongued old Mallik Massu, who summed him up to me as "a silk bag filled with rubbish." However, the camp and the sport lay in the property of him and his tribesmen, and he was therefore of considerable importance that day at least.

He is a breeder of horses, and showed for our inspection several specimens of his produce, handsome animals, a little heavy-topped and light-boned perhaps, but still useful and nicely broken.

After Shahbaz came the other chief, Ghulam Haider Khan, a big man, slow of speech, and looking much below his age, which is rare for an Oriental. He was dressed, as becomes a man who, as his enemies say, makes sport the chief business of his life, in workmanlike *khaki* cotton, with a drab tea-cosy hat. He rode, as is his wont, on a fine camel, accompanied by Maluk, his ancient gillie, a little monkey-faced old creature, in whose hair and beard, thanks to an inconstant dye, might be counted, besides the natural grey, the three colours, red, green, and blue.

The calls were of a formal nature, and conversation was limited to inquiries after each other's

wellbeing, and to courteous hopes for a continuation of good health; and then we parted for the purpose of getting well nourished before the business of the day.

Vernon came a little after me into the breakfast tent, my callers having just had time to intercept him before the meal was announced.

Miss Barbara, her rich brown hair massed under a great sun-hat, was dressed in a well-cut serviceable habit of hard-wearing material, with a spine pad to the coat.

Benson was, as usual, in the most appalling shooting kit, tattered and torn. Mrs Benson tried to apologise for him, but she got no support from me. Old favourites, I assured her, in the way of shooting or smoking coats can never be thrown away without a pang.

Vernon and I were in a greenish cloth which, experience has told us, is better for use in a tamarisk jungle than the yellow *khaki*. It was typical of Miles that, even with a fascinating young lady to live up to, he had kept to his workmanlike clothes. He may not be handsome, but he always looks fit and fresh, the very type of a healthy young Englishman. I thought there seemed approval in Miss Barbara's quick glance at him, and noticed that they were already quite on good terms, Vernon's first shyness melting for the time being at her charm, as she chatted merrily to us all.

As we started breakfast, the talk was all of the prospects of the day.

"At any rate," I said, "we have more than

enough people, and all we want is the presence of the animals."

Tun! tun! tun! went the drums beaten by the musicians of each contingent to mark their arrival. One party of Hinjras, headed by three sturdy squireens, Mahommed Khan, Ali Mahommed Khan, and Ghulam Mahommed Khan, better known as Mamdu, Allu, and Ghulamu, paraded their forces with much noise past the front of the tent to show that they were there. They, too, had brought their selection of dogs, and their net-men were men of their own tribe, not less fearless in precipitating themselves on an entangled boar because they disdained to eat the unclean beast like their neighbours.

"You would think to look at them combining to show off their tribal resources," said Vernon, "that these three fellows were the best of friends, but not a bit of it. I spend my time unravelling their cross-cases."

"Yes," I said, "and you will go on doing so unless you take the tip I gave you once before, and force on the partition of their lands."

"Primogeniture is a great thing, Mrs Benson," I said, turning to her, "apart from the fact that it drives out us younger sons to grab pieces of other Empires."

"What is their system of inheritance, Mr Travers?" she asked.

"Well," I replied, "you see they don't have primogeniture, and are all second cousins, with equal shares in the joint lands of eight villages. They have separated their abodes, and live, each surrounded by adher-

ents, a mile apart, and squabble incessantly over their common shares."

"Yes, and if they only hit at each other," said Vernon, "one would not mind, but their tenants are all involved. Charges and counter-charges of trespass, cattle-grazing, and mischief are interminable. This makes it difficult, too, to decide the rights and wrongs of any case. If Allu's tenant steals a cow, Allu tries to get him off as hard as Mamdu tries for a conviction. And if Mamdu's grazier gets caught in a house, the strongest evidence will be brought to prove that Ghulamu instigated the owner and some friends to seize the innocent man, shove him inside the door, and shut him in in order to support a charge of burglary."

"I hear such things from Dick," laughed Mrs Benson; "how on earth can you stop it?"

"Oh! once the partition is over they will all be good friends again," chimed in Vernon. "The trouble is that I can't get them to agree to any scheme for division. They all want a little of every kind of land, and there is no satisfying them anyhow."

"Well, there is an explanation for everything if one only knows it," I said, "and I do not blame them for wanting variety where this beast of an Indus is concerned. If they divided it by blocks, after a year or two Ghulamu might be a pauper owning water, Mamdu might have his fields half covered with sand, while Allu might be smiling in affluence, until the river took another turn and swung a couple of miles east or west."

Benson then joined in with a very happy idea.

"Why not ask Pir Ali Nur to intervene? He is not only a saint but an uncommonly good farmer, and he is accustomed to arbitrate among his disciples. I would not like to spoil him by getting him made an honorary magistrate, but, unofficially, he disposes of more cases than some of my official assistants."

"There is an idea for you, Vernon," I said. "Speak to them out in the field to-day, and get them to your tents before you leave here. You will thus save yourself, Rutherford, and your respective subordinates and successors an immense amount of trouble."

"Yes," I continued, "there are great merits in a day off if it is spent in shooting. We are all holiday-making at present, but only in the course of this holiday would we get the chance of bringing people together like this. I once settled a dispute between Bahadur Khan and Mian Jamal out shooting."

"How was that?" queried Benson.

"Oh, I was out bustard shooting, and lunch-time brought me up against the edge of a hill torrent. Both Bahadur Khan and Mian Jamal were with me, as I was in their country. During the meal, in which I had to eat hard-boiled eggs carefully peeled by Bahadur's own dirty but friendly fingers, the subject was raised of a big dispute between them as regards this torrent and dams that both had a right to erect. How the dams were to be put up without infringing on each other's rights was a matter that they had not solved, and the result had been a mass of litigation that was still pending on appeal before the Chief Court."

"Well, how did you arrange matters?"

"Not out of my own magnificent brain," I replied with a smile. "While I was eating the yolk only of my eggs and disposing of the thumb impressed whites, my camel-man threw out the remark that in his country they built their dams on a different pattern. The suggestion to try that pattern here was taken up, and both parties are as pleased as Punch."

"And is that why Mian Jamal is so fond of you?" asked Vernon.

"Oh, of course, in litigation he, as the poorest, would have been beaten in the end; but Bahadur is a good fellow, and only wanted his rights."

"Well, enough of yarns for the present," said Benson; "now for the fray. We need not be ready for an hour. Shahbaz' brother, Hassan, and Ali Nur's brother, Fazl Hak, will set out the beaters with your Bahadur Khan and Co., while we can go straight to our perches. The first beat ends quite close to the camp."

"Will you come, Mrs Benson, to at least one drive?" I asked.

"No, thanks, Mr Travers," was the reply. "I think I must attend to Humpie and domestic matters this morning. But perhaps Barbara will go."

"I should love to see it if I shouldn't be in anybody's way," said Miss Waynfleete.

"Indeed you wouldn't," we all assured her. "You shall sit with the person who draws Ghulam Haider's magnificent platform."

"And now," I said, "let us draw, or, being in

Benson's country, we shall find him being shoved into the best place."

I broke a piece of reed into three different lengths and held them out. Vernon drew the revolving chair tripod on the right, and Benson had to be content with sitting on a rug on the top of a simple tripod on the left. The better seat in the middle fell to me, and, with it, the fortune to chaperone Miss Barbara.

We dispersed for a time, and both Benson and I snatched minutes to dispose of the less important portions of our official post.

Vernon paced about exchanging compliments and remarks on the prospects of sport with those of the chiefs and squires who were waiting to take us to our places. He, therefore, was on the spot when Mrs Benson and Barbara brought out Humpie to see the horses.

Miles might not be much of a hand at pleasing ladies, but he was in his element when amusing the child, and Humpie took to him then and always. Vernon held him on the great wadded saddle of Sher Mahommed's fine Baloch mare, and when that had been led round sufficiently, he was transferred to the front seat of Ghulam Haider's fast Bikaniri camel, Vernon himself getting up behind.

Humpie was a little awe-stricken as the camel heaved itself up on its legs, but he kept a brave face, and was delighted at his position in the air.

"Auntie Barbara, you come up here, and Mr Vernon will hold you on," shouted Humpie gleefully.

Vernon, colouring uncomfortably, characteristically

contributed nothing to the improvement of an awkward situation. Miss Barbara, however, lost no time in starting a discussion with Mrs Benson regarding the beautiful embroidery on the coat of a minor prophet named Dullan Shah, and moved quietly away. Further trouble was avoided by Benson emerging from his tent and shouting to me, "We are to start now."

CHAPTER III.

THE PORCICIDES.

On Benson's signal, all made ready to mount.

The spruce grooms from distant Oudh brought forward our horses, both they and their charges forming a neat contrast to the wild scaramouches in coarse country cottons who ran off to fetch the nags of the leading squires. These were tied to the surrounding bushes by the single thong in which all native reins end, and, as is natural in a country where raiding has but recently gone out of fashion, had been trained to stand motionless till wanted.

They set a good example to my chestnut, who had had to turn out again because the black, led over the second part of the previous day's long journey, had only just arrived. The chestnut had evidently not quite got over the fright of the quicksand, and was fretfully roaming round and round the young groom, Bisakhi. The horse was always troublesome to mount, though, when once I was on, he would allow me to do anything, ride without reins, take off coat and wrap, and even fire from his back, a most useful trait in his character.

As Bisakhi, whose name denoted his birth on April Fool's Day, did his best to steady the animal, I watched Miss Barbara put on to her mare by Benson. Her pretty figure in its neatly fitting costume showed to great advantage as she rode, and her graceful carriage and firm, light hands made her good to look at. Vernon seemed to think so too, and managed to keep near her during the ride, her fresh interest in the unwonted experience of the day evidently giving an added zest to his own enjoyment.

Benson swung himself up with the ease of one whose seat in the saddle is as strong as his seat in the judicial chair.

"Are you all right?" he called to me.

"Yes, I shall be with you in a jiffy."

It took me a little longer to get on, because the officious Sher Mahommed came rushing to help the groom, and sent the excited animal back a dozen paces to escape from his flapping shawls. At last I was up, and had leisure to watch the natives getting on. The lither and harder men jumped into their saddles, large affairs with deep cup-shaped seats and high peaks and cantles, and, ramming their feet into the great brass stirrups, moved off quickly. But men like Bahadur Khan and Mallik Massu, whose years, bulk, and position entitled them to have these saddles, intolerable to Europeans in any case, well padded with quilts, required time and assistance to mount. The looseness of their baggy white trousers enhanced the broadness of their beam, and Massu especially, riding a lean

though very wiry mare, bulged over her slim sides in a peculiarly quaint manner, cutting a figure that delighted us all.

"The joint is too big for the dish," remarked Benson to me in a whisper that would have carried a mile.

At last all were on horseback, and, waving farewells to Mrs Benson and Humpie, we moved across the broad stretch of open grazing-ground that lay in front of our camp.

It was possible now to see how the land lay, whereas, the day before, when riding rapidly, wet and uncomfortable, through the haze, we had hardly been able to distinguish the bare outlines. The line of white canvas dwellings with the secondary row of servants' gipsy tents was backed by a thin brake of reeds, from which, in the early morning, the calls of black partridge had resounded. At a convenient distance stood a cluster of wattle and brushwood huts, the only dwelling-places of the farmers of the fields close by, which in summer lay waist deep in the swirling yellow flood of the mighty stream.

The huts had been annexed by the rural notables, only Ghulam Haider Khan possessing a small tent as befitted one constantly in search of sport. The humbler folk, including those dispossessed, had to camp in the open,—no great hardship in the days when summer and winter meet. The neighbourhood of the camp wore a deserted look, except for our servants who were busy with domestic details. All others had disappeared to the beat, with the

exception of those who were to accompany us to our shooting places.

Miss Waynfleete was much impressed by the gathering of riders with us.

"What a crowd of horsemen!" she said. "Surely they are not all going to shoot. Who will work the beat?"

I looked round. Certainly the number of people carrying rifles, guns, and other impedimenta for each of us and for the two chiefs appeared excessive. Then there were several matchlock men, though of course a number were mere officious fellows who always cling near the skirts of the great.

"It will be all right," answered Benson. "Most of these will go off, once we are in position, to get the line on the move, but you must wait till you see the mob that has turned out."

Benson and I fell back a bit, as we crossed a field of the light friable soil in which wheat manages to thrive best in the riverain. Our squires and their retinue fell back too, at the respectful distance which each was expected to preserve, and thus Barbara was able to ride on with Miles as her escort, unaffected by the all-pervading dust that rose in clouds and whitened the beards and hair of the humbler riders in the background.

Mallik Massu's little steed ran along at a quick amble, subdued by his rider's great bulk into sobriety. Far different was the case with Bahadur Khan, who evidently believed in the adage that he who keeps fat cattle should himself be fat. The country-bred mare that had to carry his substantial frame was

grossly over-fed, and proceeded, crab-fashion, after the manner of a cat on hot bricks.

The gentry of Benson's district had ranged themselves on his side, so I turned to my own folk.

"Better day than yesterday, eh Mallik Sahib?" I said, turning to our co-sharer in the disaster of the day before.

"May my Lord and his children live. The saints were on our side in that creek," replied our plump friend.

"Ha! ha!" bellowed Bahadur. "It was Massu's fat that saved him. He wallowed like a porpoise or some other portent of the river. He had no need to call on his spiritual guide to save him."

"Well," I said, "you were no earthly use to us as a guide across the water, Khan Sahib. It was all your fault that we got bogged."

"Ah!" interjected the fat grazier, delighted at my intervention on his behalf. "The Sahib says truth. You are a misleader of men. That comes of taking to new saints like the Messiah of Mankiala."

Our folk are strong believers in the necessity, for all mankind, of some means of intervention between God and man, and all, except a few, looked down on as semi-atheists, have their chosen Pir, or spiritual adviser, through whose sanctity they hope to be able to approach the Deity better than they could alone. Even Pirs themselves are unable to get along single-handed, and have Pirs of their own.

We might have had a heated discussion as to the merits of the different saints of the neighbourhood, and especially with regard to the Messiah, who,

curiously enough, found his clientele of believers, like Mrs Eddy, among the higher and more educated classes. But, as religious discussions usually led to hot talk, I was not sorry to find we were approaching our places for the first beat.

Our positions were fixed in a glade only forty yards wide, separating two large jungles of reed, tamarisk, and dwarf poplar. The wood was flanked on one side by the field of peas and pulse which we had just crossed, and was divided into two pieces by a low embankment of sand which extended right through in both directions.

The tripod with the revolving chair, which had fallen to the lot of Vernon, was on the right, shrouded from view by a tamarisk bush of suitable height. The structure, on which Miss Waynfleete and myself were to sit, was formed of a collapsible seat for two, placed on a high table, also collapsible, but our first misgivings as to its capability to bear both the lady and myself were uncalled for. The yellow legs of the platform mingled well with the tall reeds in which they stood, and we could see all in front without being too obvious to the approaching animals. Benson and Shahbaz had plain tripods across the sand embankment, and Sher Mahommed took off the heavy quilt from his pony's saddle to make things easier for the Head of the other district. All the Hazratabad gentlemen had elected to join the beaters, leaving only Ghulamu, Hinjra, to squat with an ancient matchlock behind a low bush close to Shahbaz Khan, but there seemed to be no room in the glade for another gun.

"Where will Sirdar Ghulam Haider Khan go?" I asked. Benson replied that Ghulam Haider was expert enough to find a good place for himself; and, sure enough, he and his monkey-faced retainer, Maluk, found a spot for their high four-poster bed to the side of the beat, where animals that shirked crossing the glade were almost certain to break across. Rifles, glasses, shot-guns, and cameras, with cartridges of different kinds, were deposited on each seat by the attendant riders, and gradually we got our horses removed, and sent the surplus horsemen off to start and join in the drive.

Benson and Shahbaz Khan disappeared over the embankment. Vernon was new to this form of amusement, and was preparing to get on to his perch, when I called to him to come to sit with us in the shadow of our seat.

"There is plenty of time," I said. "The beaters are at least a mile, and, may be, a mile and a half away. When the riders arrive there, and get them into something like order, we shall hear the rumble of a distant drum. When I am by myself I always bring plenty to read."

Vernon made no objection, and sat down with us.

"Heavens!" I said suddenly. "Look at that. There is a man with a musket ahead of us in that corner on the right. Always remember to scour round on these occasions, Vernon. You would have shot in that direction for a certainty, and would probably have bagged him."

Many objurgations and exclamations followed, and the ardent sportsman had to shift.

"That is the worst of our long-range rifles. They are not intended for this game, and the other guns forget that there are weapons which carry farther than a muzzle-loader and slugs."

"Oh, Mahtams," I shouted, "where are you?"

To Barbara's great surprise, a man of whose presence we had no idea, though I knew he must be in the neighbourhood, emerged from a bush five yards behind us, while another appeared from a similar bush a few yards to the left. They were each clad in a loin-cloth only, without even a wisp of a turban about their unkempt locks, the better to mingle in the shadow of the bushes. After staking out their forty-feet nets on staves that would pull up easily, they had squatted a short space in front of either end, ready to leap up and, yelling, plunge on any hapless beast that might get entangled in the toils.

"Where are the nets, oh Mahtams?" I inquired.

"God guard your grandsons," was the reply, prefaced with the quaint local benediction. "We have them here, and the whole jungle is tied from here to a hundred yards past the Sirdar."

"There are plenty of you, I suppose?" I continued.

"Yes," was the reply. "We Mahtams are at this end, and the Labanas across the embankments. The Kehals have had to go across to the other wood behind Sardar Ghulam Haider."

"It seems to me, Miss Waynfleete, that the two districts have overdone the drive between them," said Vernon.

"Don't you be too sure," I answered. "This is

not February, and there is no certainty of success Just look at the thickness of the jungle in front."

The glade was, in the main, carpeted with coarse and tufty yellow grass, but here and there were small hollows, till recently full of water.

We walked out to examine the nearest. The clay, not quite baked over, gave a very good idea of the animals that had passed and repassed over it. Amidst the great footprints of the buffaloes, which had also used the pools as wallowing-places as long as the moisture lasted, could be seen the rounded hoofs of pig of all sizes, and the sharply-cut slender tracks of the hog-deer.

"This promises well, Miss Waynfleete," I said.

"Yes, I suppose so," was the reply, "but what are these tracks? Are they those of jackals?"

I shook my head doubtfully, and Vernon chimed in.

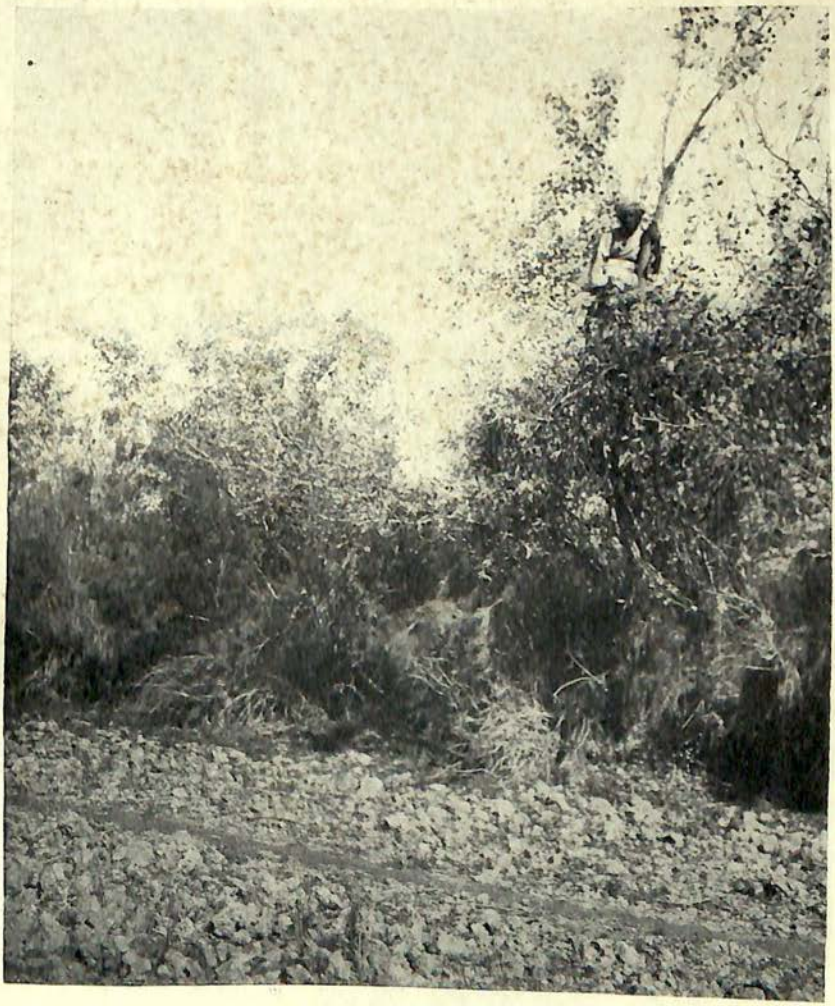
"No, these must be jackals here," he said, pointing to some other impressions. "I wonder if those are wild-cats. I got a beauty out partridge-shooting one day."

Our Mahtam enlightened our ignorance.

"May my Lord live in prosperity. Those are the marks of an otter, the dog of the river."

"I never knew that they came inland," I said. "Yet, after all, we are not far from the river bank here. Well, there go the drums, let us get back to our places."

Vernon had to go off reluctantly to his perch, while Miss Barbara and I scrambled on to ours. The Mahtams disappeared behind us to squat silently among the bushes again.



A Mahtam in a tree.

"You won't mind if I give you some advice," I said, turning to my fair companion, who was full of the excitement of anticipation.

"Not at all," she replied. "I want to see, not spoil, the sport."

"Well, if you see anything before I do, don't gesticulate or make any outcry. Merely touch my elbow and look in the right direction. I shall spot it at once."

She nodded her pretty head with a motion of assent, and settled down on my left to give me more freedom to fire on the awkward side.

I loaded up my rifle, and put some heavy shot cartridges into my gun. This I made a show of offering to Miss Barbara, but she shook her head. I also put out on the seat by me a selection of lighter ammunition for the partridges that come out frequently at the end of a beat. Occasionally, during a long wait, some other travelling birds drift by, and it is as well to be prepared for all emergencies.

In the place of the gun, I suggested the camera to my companion, who got it out ready at once, and began by taking a picture of a Mahtam, who had clambered up a dwarf poplar in order to give us information of the advent of the beasts.

The sound of the drum came faintly from the far edge of the wood, and the camera was put down.

"Don't set your nerves at tension yet," I said. "I used to do so at the first, but know better now. Look at Mr Vernon. How keen he is! It is no harm for a young fellow to learn patience, but this job takes time."

Barbara looked, as I intended, across at Vernon, who was sitting keyed up to the highest pitch of preparation.

There was much to admire in the strong figure silhouetted in the clear light of the full sun's rays, and it was not for nothing that I had drawn attention to it.

"Had we not better be on the look-out too?" was her remark. "Something might come when we were not ready."

I was making some reply when a voice from the bush below called in low tones but distinctly, "Shut up."

I was quite accustomed to the fact that honorifics quickly disappear from the conversations of our rather bucolic squires and farmers, after the first sentence or two, and, if truth be told, I had myself dropped into the local habit of addressing with "thees" and "thous" gentlemen high enough to be members of the Viceregal Council. It was, however, a bit of a shock to be rebuked in that tone by a mere Mahtam, a man of no caste and no status. But sport is a great leveller, and, if the words used were wrong, the rebuke was right.

I turned to Miss Waynfleete, and dropping my voice to a whisper, said—

"Look out for the first jackal that comes. They invariably start to slink out of the jungle first, and so give warning."

For a time I sat rigid, but nothing came, so, standing up, I scoured with my glasses the sea of reed heads that lay in front. I could see nothing

A mounted drummer.

but a white speck or two in the far distance that marked the heads of the camel riders. The line was evidently working round an outlying patch, so I sat down again, and gave my nerves a rest, but, at last, the distant cries became more and more distinguishable. Independent whoops and yells and wild shouts of "Whah Hu, Whah Hu," sounded faintly in the still air. Then, as they drew closer, one could make out the shrill scream of Sher Mahommed, and the harsh voice of Allu Hinjra, calling on all to raise the common cry of invocation. In reply, the united voices of all the beaters resounded not unmusically with the call "Dum Bahawal Hak-a," a prayer to the great patron Saint of Multan and of all the Indus riverain.

As the volume of sound grew louder and louder, I became more alert and watchful, and kept my head and eyes shifting steadily from right to left and back again, but, despite all my vigilance, it was Miss Barbara who saw the first arrival.

I was just looking towards the embankment, when she touched my elbow.

"Bravo!" I whispered, as an old grey jackal slipped across the glade, quite unconscious of the presence of any one. Another animal came out of the edge of the jungle close to Vernon, and I was surprised to see him prepare to shoot.

He pulled the trigger, and Miss Barbara whispered to me, "Wasn't he silly to fire at a jackal?"

"Yes," I answered, "if it *was* a jackal, but Mr Vernon has some woodcraft. I wonder what he has shot."

In the distance one could just see the turbans of the camel-riders appearing over the tops of the giant reeds, and hear brisk yells of directions to the coolie line, prayers to the saints, and wishes generally for the disturbance of the peace of the animals. Again, however, there was a lull as the line of beaters swung round an outlying curve. The jackals had all cleared off, and nothing else came. The minutes passed, and the tension was severe. Little warblers perched fearlessly near us on the slender reeds which swayed as if too delicate to bear even their feather-weight, and a party of brown babblers stole in and out of the bushes below.

At last I discerned a movement on the edge of the wood opposite, and, shifting gently half right, made ready. But it was a crow pheasant, with its fine russet wings, that hopped cheerily across the glade.

Again there was a lull, and nothing of any kind appeared until the strain of watching relaxed of itself. My eye was half led off to look skyward at the gyrations of two fine fish eagles, who screamed harshly to each other in the blue above, when suddenly, without any apparent coming, a dark-brown animal had arrived before us.

It was a hog-deer, with moderate horns, a thick-set little creature very much like a pig in size and colour, and a denizen of the densest thickets.

It stood irresolute, just visible on the edge of the wood about sixty yards off. I raised my rifle slowly, but it is difficult to attain the golden mean between caution and speed, and, alas! just as I was pulling the trigger it dashed across and plunged into the nets.

We heard the scuffle and the rush of the Mahtams of the net next ours to secure the prey. There were prompt calls for Abdulla, a Mahommedan who had been told off to sit near us, but he had already hurried off with a large knife to cut the beast's throat and make it lawful meat.

My miss was not a complete one, as I had hit my quarry through both hind legs, but it was none the less unsatisfactory. The scuffle on our side discouraged further comers for a time, but we heard three shots in quick succession.

"Those pig must have passed between Benson and Shahbaz," I whispered to my companion, whose cheeks were glowing with excitement.

Then came a crashing through the undergrowth for which I prepared. A pig put out his snout exactly opposite, but fled back at once under cover.

"Oh, Mr Travers, I am so sorry I moved," said Barbara, who had turned sharply towards the noise.

"It is all right; he must break again soon," I replied, though none too pleased at heart.

The line grew closer and closer, and the din of drums, yells, and shouted directions was awful.

"Look, Mr Vernon is going to shoot," whispered Miss Barbara.

Vernon raised his rifle, but lowered it again. A minute later, however, he and I were both pounding lead at a sounder of five that was breaking across between us. Two remained on the ground in the open, and one of the others fell into the nets, the rest breaking past.

Some more bangs resounded on the left, and there

were other reports as men fired from the trees on the flanks. The yells and drumming became simply fiendish, and we could hear the Pir Sahib adding to the din in language which would have got him banned from the Church in this country.

"Keep line, you infernal blackguards! Curses on your immortal souls, oh scoundrels and thieves, you have let the pig break back! May the wrath of God devour you!"

Sher Mahommed and the Hinjras were directing the Hazratabad contingents in similar forcible manner. The beaters, impelled by the language and their own excitement, broke into fresh yells. Dark beasts kept appearing suddenly here and there, and, after bringing my heart into my mouth, turning into dogs, not pigs.

At last the riders on the left emerged, and overlapped the end of the glade.

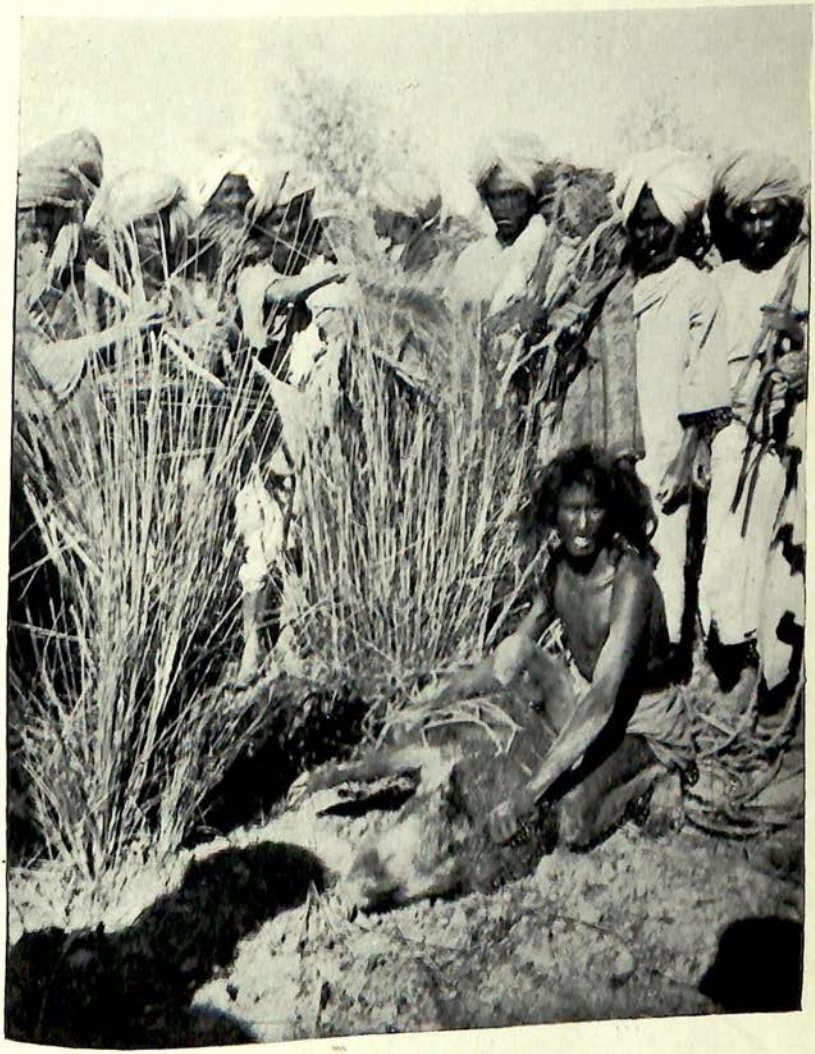
"That is all over as far as we are concerned," I said to Miss Waynfleete.

A huge boar, however, waited till the last moment, and plunged across with a mass of curs in pursuit at a safe distance. We heard the uproar that marked his entanglement in the net.

"I wonder if they will shirk him?" I said. "A pig gets clear if not collared quickly."

However, squeals seemed to indicate that some one had the leg and ear hold on him, and more Mahtams rushed through the reeds to help to tie him up.

Partridges now began to break, some back and some across, and we could see one bird soaring above Vernon come down crumpled from the sky. Then the beaters began to emerge.



A pig in the toils.

"Fancy camels getting through such a wood!" said Miss Barbara as the red-bearded Fazl Hak pressed his way out just opposite, and Ghulam Haider's little nephew, aged seven, with two retainers behind him, showed out very excited at the fun. All the leading men came crowding up to hear what had happened and to exchange information.

"Hurrah!" said our friend of the knife, who, to give him his full name, is Abdulla, the Slave of God and the Well-wisher of the people of God. "May good fortune ever attend you. It has been a great beat. The dogs chopped three porkers in the jungle."

Bahadur Khan, who had preferred to watch his dogs work rather than taking his own chances of a shot, came hurrying up full of the news that Bagla had captured a full-sized sow unaided.

"Splendid," I said. "A credit to you and your selection," and Bahadur beamed.

By this time Benson and Shahbaz had come over the embankment and were giving us their account.

"What luck?" I asked.

"Shahbaz got one pig hit in the forehead," answered Benson. "But I could do nothing where I was. Most of my chances were at beasts crossing the embankment, and whenever this happened there was always a pack of lazy beaters on the dam shirking the jungle work. I fired twice, but always had to wait too late before I dared to loose off."

"Never mind; it is all fate. We on this side have done well, and the net-men have a fine boar."

"Would you like to see the entangled boar, Miss Waynfleete?" I asked.

"Yes, please," said Miss Barbara; and then to Miles, "What did you shoot at the beginning, Mr Vernon?"

"It was a great old wolf," he answered. "Perhaps you would like to have a look at him too."

We got off our stand and walked along.

"It was by the blessings of the Pir that I seized the boar," shouted a stout Mahtam, pushing himself forward into prominence.

Pir Ali Nur contented himself with patting the sportsman's head in clerical fashion, but Shahbaz Khan and Sher Mahommed bestowed prompt largesse.

"You'll come on to the next beat, won't you, Miss Waynfleete?" asked Vernon hopefully.

"No, thank you. This has been a great experience, but it is getting warm."

"Well," remarked Benson, "you have been lucky in getting such a good show. The only time I took May we saw nothing, which may account for her absence now."

"Perhaps you will let Mr Vernon canter home with you, Barbara," he went on. "Unless Mr Travers and I stay and shove these fellows along, they will be hours over the next beat. Time is no object to them as it is to us."

"Thank you, I shall be glad if it is not a trouble to Mr Vernon," replied Miss Waynfleete.

Benson had given his sister-in-law a splendid bay waler to ride, and she made a fine figure on it as she rode easily away with a small party as

escort. Vernon, obviously conscious of her perfections, was shy and awkward, and seemed to have little to say to her as they went.

"Ah!" said Mallik Massu, who knows a good horse when he sees one. "That's a mare as is a mare," which for him was high praise.

The platforms, tripods, and four-posters were all moved and put, some on camels, and others on men's heads, and we moved on amidst a large mass of horses, men, and dogs, about a couple of miles. There we left the beaters to lie and rest in the shade of the wood, while we rode on with the principal men amidst much adulation, condolence, laughter, or sympathy, as the case might be.

Ghulam Haider joined us on his camel with Maluk.

"Well, what luck, Sardar Sahib?"

"I got nothing, but this blacksmith of my tribe killed a hog-deer. Unfortunately, it is not lawful meat."

"That is no harm in our eyes. Please send it to our tents. The one we killed is fit for the Sardars."

Mallik Massu and Bahadur Khan were bickering again in friendly fashion as usual.

"It was very difficult to get the beaters to spread," shouted Bahadur Khan, who had heard of Benson's trouble with shirkers on the embankment. "They all wanted to go down the wide lane made by the Mallik's passage."

Massu, by way of retort, threw doubt on the prowess of Bahadur Khan's dog.

Talking and chaffing, we at last reached an open

field of pasture, 250 yards wide, with the river flanking one side and a depression with several pools of water half a mile away down the open space.

The Hazratabad people shook their heads. "How do you expect to get anything across here, Sardar Ghulam Haider?" asked Allu, the one-eyed Hinjra.

"Don't ask me," was the disdainful reply of the old sportsman. "Sardar Shahbaz Khan is running the drive. It is his country, not mine."

The young Sardar, thus appealed to, put the blame on the Pir's younger brother, Fazl Hak, a fat red-bearded fellow, just as jovial and just as foul-tongued as the saint himself.

"Besides, we had a very good beat here in March last. Don't you remember?" said Shahbaz Khan, languidly fanning himself with a gaudy silk handkerchief.

Sharu Khan Lishari, shrewdest of farmers, and under suspicion as head of all the local cattle thieves when opportunity allowed, corroborated this.

"But," he went on, "this is November, not March. However, we must put up with it. The seats will have to be well back in the jungle on this side, and, perhaps, God and the Pir of Uch will send a pig to Benson Sahib."

"How do you think the seats should be arranged?" said Benson to the elder sportsman.

But Ghulam Haider and the red-beard were already moving off, and we saw them scanning the ground between the pools, and, later on, we heard a retainer calling for the high four-poster bed on

which he was to squat. Perches were put up for ourselves and Shahbaz Khan at intervals of two hundred yards across the front of the woods. All sorts of musket and matchlock men dotted themselves about, each squatting behind a thick reed clump which they broke and wove to the height of their eyes. One sportsman sat in a cleft below the river bank, just able to see along the surface of the ground.

Vernon came clattering in just as the surplus riders were going to start the beaters, and we settled ourselves into our respective places.

The Labanas behind me were very talkative, and clearly shared in the pessimistic views on Shahbaz' choice of a beat.

"No, Sahib, they will not break across so open a space in this season."

"Surely there are hundreds of beaters?" I asked.

"Pigs don't mind a million beaters if they decide not to go in a certain direction," was the reply.

"Why did the Sardar choose this, then?"

"Oh! He is a nobleman, and knows about nothing except his wine and women. He is not a real sportsman like Ghulam Haider, and is only out to please the *Sahibs*."

At last the drums began to throb again, and we told the men to take their seats in the reeds.

However, as far as we were concerned, the prognostications were correct. More than one animal appeared on the edge of the far jungle and raised our hopes, but none came across, though the drummers on horse and on foot beat their loudest,

and the Pir and his friends roared in the choicest Billingsgate.

Bang! bang! suddenly went two barrels in the distance.

"Ah!" I said, "Ghulam Haider has the best of it."

Another couple of shots followed, and a single one from the blacksmith attendant.

Whatever was going on was round the bend away from us, and we descended as the beaters came through to the open.

Shahbaz Khan was a little sheepish. We put him at his ease as best we could.

"Never mind, Sardar Sahib; if all hunts ended in slaughter, there would be nothing left to hunt. Where do we go now?"

But Shahbaz Khan did not get off so easily with his own friends. Ghulam Haider came up smiling with pride at two big tuskers to his credit.

"Why did you not put the Sahibs where I went?" he asked. "Of course they were bound to break there."

"How could I tell?" replied the younger man.

"Why, you could tell that from the shape of the jungle, and the ground was covered with tracks."

"Tracks!" chimed in Maluk of the tricoloured beard. "We sat over against a regular pathway for pig."

Ghulamu, Hinjra, a pleasant, square-jawed fellow with a quizzical look in his eye, joined in. "Our net-men spotted that breaking place too, and have a sow with the blacksmith's slug in her, and two of her little ones."

The Pi leads the beaters.

"Do you give licences to blacksmiths, Benson?" I asked. "I consider shooting a sport for gentlefolk, and cut down all menials' licences."

"So do I," he assented. "It is wicked the way some of these native gentry stay at home and send out a low-caste baker or a fisherman to kill game for them. I must see about this fellow."

We moved off again to another beat, and after arrival near our places, we sat down to discuss a lunch which had been on the move with us all the time.

The stands were put up again, and by the time the cold bustard had been disposed of all was in readiness.

We are all believers in the rule, "No intoxicants before sundown in India," so plain soda or ginger-beer was not likely to interfere with our aim.

"Ah! that's better," said Benson and I simultaneously, on seeing the new places for our shooting this time.

The seats were placed well within the jungle itself, but within a radius of seventy to eighty yards from each perch there were only thin reeds.

"You must look out all the time, Vernon," warned Benson. "The animals will be walking or trotting at their ease, and hog-deer make no noise, and pig very little."

"All right," said Vernon, who was as keen as could be.

The beat commenced. The inevitable jackals suddenly materialised without seeming to arrive, one passing unsuspiciously within a yard of my seat, but nothing more important appeared.

I sat and sat. The beat seemed far away. The sun was very strong on the back, despite a sun-helmet and a spine-pad, and I began to think of Barbara, and to wonder if she would reciprocate the obvious liking of my assistant. It is not everybody who can see at once what sterling qualities lie under his somewhat stolid exterior. As to Miles, there was no doubt what had happened to him. It was evidently a case of love at first sight, and I fancied that, as is the way with strong people in their maladies, he was going to take it badly. These thoughts led me back to the days when Kitty was alive, and . . . suddenly I woke to the fact that a large hog-deer was coming through the thin reeds straight towards me, and had nearly reached my stand.

How often have I been told, and how often have I told myself, to avoid spasmodic movements!

But I was always more at home with a shot-gun than with a rifle. Up went my weapon with a jerk, and the hog-deer swerved at once. Immediately two largish bushes intervened somehow or other between me and it. The net-men were at the end of the jungle some distance back, so I was able to go on firing wherever I could get a glimpse of the moving beast. It was no good, though I poured a whole clipful from my magazine. I was late if I snapped at what I could see, and aiming in front of a bush in the hope of it breaking there gave no better result.

I saw the little beast out of sight, and sat down swearing at myself for a fool. In so many kinds

of shooting there is some one else on whom to put the blame, which is, at least, restful and consoling, but to be obliged to blame oneself alone is very trying.

I hoped to be able to redeem the situation, but cards never forgive, and the chance did not come again. I had to sit the beat out very much awake and on the *qui vive*, with eyes roaming from side to side of my circumscribed horizon.

However, both Vernon and Benson came off victorious, and Shahbaz Khan had hit a very small pigling. The latter was delighted, because Ghulam Haider had had a blank time.

"Oh yes," said the latter, "I must congratulate you. Beginners cannot pick. I never myself shoot at undersized animals."

Benson hastened to disagree with Ghulam Haider. "Pigs are things to be cleared off at all ages," he insisted.

The whole crowd assembled, and we talked over the bag. The low-caste men were very pleased. There were two large tuskers in the nets, besides sows and porkers and ten dead, with two hog-deer, one for ourselves and one lawful for the chiefs to eat.

After a bit of chatter we decided that we should not get in another beat before dusk, so we made ready for home.

Benson, like myself, is accustomed to waste no time on the road, and prepared to set off at full speed towards the camp.

"Where will the people go?" grumbled Sher Mahommed. "They have not seen the show."

"What show?" asked Vernon.

"No show for us," Benson replied. "I am not exactly a member of the Humanitarian League, but bull-baiting and other kindred amusements have gone out so long in England, that seeing the dogs worry the captured boars is a little revolting to our stomachs."

"I would not mind it if they would give the beast a chance with one or two dogs," I said, concurring. "The only time I saw it we tried to arrange this, but every spectator let loose his own dog too, so I made off."

"It has to be done, I suppose," said Vernon, "just as foxes have to be broken up, or dogs would never tackle in the jungle. They do a bit also of lying out after sounders in the fields at night apparently. Ghulamu told me his tenants got twenty-five young pig that way in a month."

So we left the massed crowds to enjoy their show, and taking three riders to carry our shot-guns, cantered back to camp.

Mrs Benson gave us tea on arrival, and was full of congratulations; evidently Miss Barbara had given her a glowing account of the sport she had witnessed.

Benson and I bolted off to work after tea, leaving the ladies with Vernon, who had nothing to do except to meet the Saint and the Hinjras over the latter's dispute when the sport was finished.

After dinner we were talking hard, with the cheerfulness that comes after a good day, when the throb! throb! of a small drum and the tinkling of an Indian guitar was heard. Benson started up.

"By the bye, Shahbaz Khan asked me if he could entertain you with a *Nakl?*"

"What is that?" asked Barbara.

"Oh! A native mimetic performance of sorts. It will serve to pass the evening."

We went outside fairly well wrapped up, for the range of temperature in November is forty degrees, and the transition from the heat at two o'clock to the evening chill is a severe one.

A good audience was assembled. Our gentry were with us on chairs. Shahbaz Khan was in the same patent leather boots and delicate clothes that he wore during the day. Ghulam Haider had doffed the *khaki* of the sportsman, and was magnificent as only a Baloch can be in folds and folds of snowy white. Bahadur Khan and Sher Mahommed had put on their finest embroidered coats. Allu, Ghulamu, and Mamdu, each had a touch of finery on coat or turban, but Mallik Massu wore the same greasy shirt and waist-cloth, well stained with perspiration, which he had worn when toiling through the thickets. Abdulla, already introduced as the well-wisher of the people of God, welcomed us and escorted us to our seats, and then retired to sit with the mob of camp-followers and retainers of the chiefs, saints, and squireens.

The performers numbered but five. One played on the small drum, on which concentric rings marked the varying depths of sound, while the other twanged the local guitar.

The actors required but little disguise. The removal of a shirt and the disordered twisting of a

turban turned one into a Jat peasant; neatness of garb, combined with a small skull-cap, changed another into a Hindu money-lender; and so began the time-honoured play of the peasant and his shop account.

"Let us settle accounts, oh Kallu," suggests the money-lender.

"Do I owe you anything?" the sheepish Jat replies.

"Oh yes. I have it all down in my ledger. Here you are, 2 and 2 = 6, and 4 = 13, and 7 = 25, and 6 = 37 annas. That makes 5 rupees. Add 4 and 2 makes 9, and 2 makes 15, and 6 makes 28, and 8 makes 40. Another 5 rupees. So you see you owe me now 25 rupees."

"But what of that goat I gave you in August, and the sack of wheat?"

"Oh! that was due to me for interest. However, I won't ask you for the money now. Just write your name here."

"What is that paper? What am I to write?"

"Don't I tell you I don't want your money. Merely write."

And so the Jat writes his name to a bond for a hundred rupees, and is promptly sued, and suffers various troubles.

The audience had heard this tale a thousand times, but it is always fresh, and Mallik Massu's great bellow resounded in the clear air.

The wit of the ensuing pieces was largely of the knock-about type, and fortunately the programme varies as little as the plots themselves, so that I found both Benson and I were rising to our feet

simultaneously as the jokes passed from the spoken chaff of an impure type, which only those skilled in the dialect could catch, to the broader pantomime which could hardly fail to carry a meaning without words.

So with bows, smiles, and thanks, we steered the ladies home, well pleased with what we had seen, and not unprepared for a good night's sleep.

CHAPTER IV.

AN ILL-OMENED HARE.

NEXT morning I leapt out of bed, nearly dashing into Mamdu with the tray of tea and toast.

With the first streaks of light a large party of cranes was passing low just over my tent, and it was their gentle gurgle that was the cause of my excitement. Nothing can stop me from having a look on such occasions, and experience has told me that there are times when the early gun catches the bird. However, they passed on, and I could see by their flight that they had no grazing-ground near. I reluctantly went back to bed to digest tea and the Lahore newspaper.

All round the camp was stir and bustle, while from far and near, and even from across the Indus, I could hear the sound of the drums that were calling on the men of each village to turn out for the destruction of their common enemies. Even though the first beat is seldom set in motion before eleven o'clock, it is necessary to rouse men early, if they are to be on the spot in time, well heartened as to the inner man, especially when they have to cross the river or its branches.

When I went out to take a turn or two in front of the camp before breakfast, I found Vernon engaged in a great romp outside the dining-tent with his friend Humpie, a romp in which Miss Barbara had also become involved. There is nothing like the presence of a child to bring out all that is fresh and natural in grown-ups, whose attitude to each other is so often forced into unnatural restraint. However, I had hardly caught sight of the merry trio when the gong summoned us all in to breakfast. India does so much to blanch the cheeks of those who have been there long, that the rosy colour made in the home country always possesses a charm of its own. The glow of the game had given an added brightness to the young girl's face, and made her look more charming than ever.

"Will you come again with us, Barbara?" asked Benson. "What I advise is that you should be prepared to join us about three o'clock. We shall ride off six miles now, and beat back to within two miles, ending up the last drive quite close here. We will send for you from the nearest suitable point."

"Will you not come too, Mrs Benson?" I suggested. "It must be so dull to sit in camp all day, merely looking after the needs of hungry hunters."

"I have Humpie, you know," was the quiet reply. "Besides, Barbara was in luck. I found it very dull the time I went, so I shan't risk bringing you a blank day."

As we went outside, we saw again assembled near the tents the crowd of native sportsmen. Benson's

orderlies were bustling about providing chairs for the great, and string beds for those of intermediate dignity. Doorkeepers have their perquisites, but are also expected to earn them by courtesy.

All were friends together. What mattered that one had a lawsuit with another, ready for hearing two days hence, or that the uncle of a third had been murdered in the days of Sikh rule by the grandfather of a fourth? Allu, Ghulamu, and Mamdu, Hinjras, sat on the same native cot, despite their past feuds and the possibility that Pir Ali Nur might not be able to bring about a permanent settlement.

That holy personage, too, had with him in perfect amity his nephew, the son of his elder brother, who, having approached the age of seventeen, was commencing to put forward his claim to the Seat on the Prayer-Carpet. This claim to lead the devotions of the assemblage of the faithful by virtue of his priority of descent would have also diverted a large portion of the stream of offerings which the venerable Pir had been able, so far, to utilise for his own needs: thus, as sanctity does not exclude affection for this world's goods, there was the making of a fine quarrel.

The two *Sardars* were none too cordial to each other in ordinary life. The armed struggles for land between the two Baloch tribes had left behind bitter feelings, and these had been kept alive by the litigation over areas of which the ownership had been rendered doubtful during the twelve years of Sikh interference.

But all are friends in sport, and the sport of the day before had been plentiful enough to inspire a spirit of cheerfulness into every one.

We turned out to exchange greetings with our friends, and to get on the move towards the first wood, which lay at a considerable distance, as Benson had said. Waving our hands to the ladies at the tent door, we pushed off without much ceremony.

We had hardly started when my spaniel, Buster, dashed into a bush, and a hare ran out.

The buzz of conversation and chaff stopped at once, while the men on foot hurled their staves fruitlessly at it.

"Devil take them," said Vernon. "What an unruly crowd. It was only a hare."

"Oh! These people have their superstitions like the rest of the world," I said, "and a hare seen ahead of one first thing in the morning is considered unlucky. I wish I had left Buster behind. I generally do on these occasions. Never mind, Khan Sahib," I continued, addressing Bahadur Khan, whose depression was obvious. "Cheer up! Perhaps we shall have a good day after all. It isn't Friday, anyway."

"The base-born breeder of bastards," was Bahadur's vicious comment. "What did the daughter of shame want to show her ill-omened presence for?"

"Well," said Vernon, to whom the Pathan Chief's vocabulary of abuse is a constant source of wonder, "that ought to shake her up a bit, if words can harm."

The ride continued in gloom, and this was intensified by the fact that for a solid two miles we had

to thread our way in single file through the woods on the edge of the river. The stream even in the winter was biting into the bank, so that at frequent invervals the path had disappeared altogether into the water. We had, therefore, occasionally to force our way through the reeds and saplings, until a bit of a buffalo track led us back to our narrow way again. We got clear of this at last, and put on the pace a bit to shake up our livers and cheer ourselves up.

After going some time, I pulled up my black, and, with a word to Benson and Vernon, held up my hand to stop the onrush of the riders behind.

"What is it?" asked Benson.

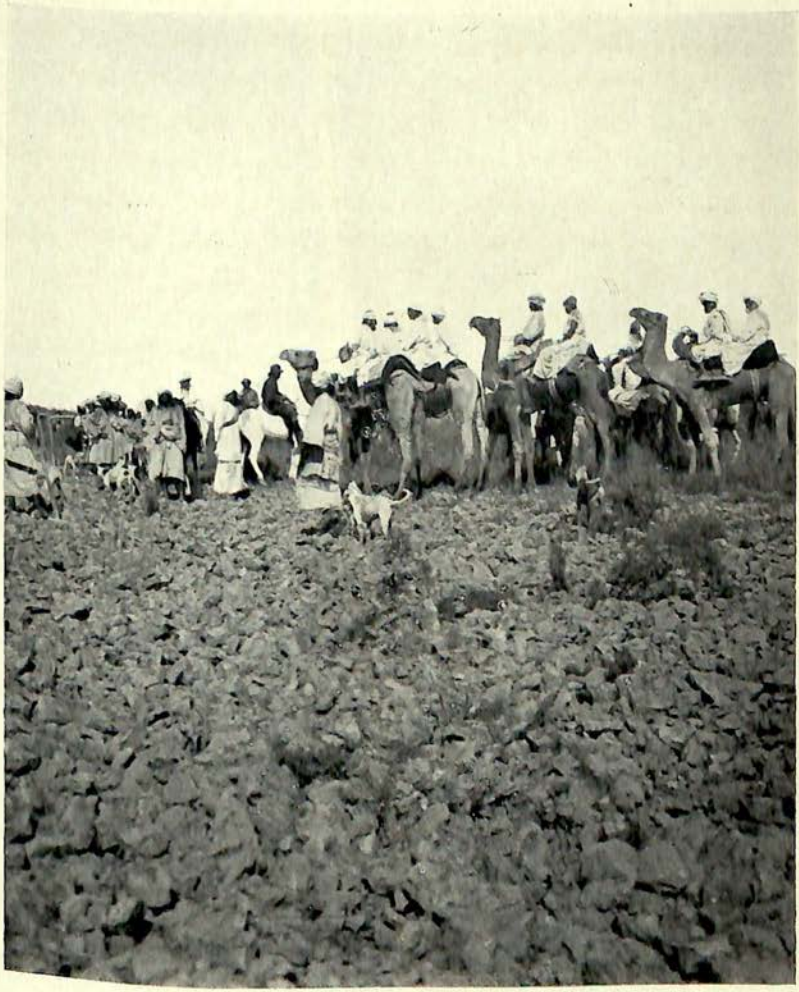
"Demoiselle Cranes," was my reply. "Didn't you hear some going over the tents this morning? It is good to have them back again in these parts."

Benson soon spotted the long birds that looked like men in the fields some five hundred yards away, and he and I began to take counsel how we might find a lurking-place behind them, and have them driven.

"Confound it," cried Vernon. "They are up."

And so they were. The long grey birds, rising with slow flappings of their great wings, were off with resonant cries, and there was nothing to be done but to see why they had been frightened.

The offender was Allu, the one-eyed — no rider at the best of times. Our people like to draw up abreast whenever the country is open enough, and he had been riding on the end of the line with his blind eye towards us. He had not seen the signal



The drive begins.

to stop, and, with his animal not properly under control, had gone on a long distance before he noticed his isolation.

"That is bad luck," said Benson. "Among the blind the one-eyed is king, but he is not much use among sportsmen, who want all the eyes that they can use."

Mamdu, Hinjra, taking up Benson's cue, started to reel off other proverbs deprecatory of one-eyed men, but, as some kind friend was certain to pass them on, I pulled him up. I did not want the hoped-for settlement between the cousins spoilt in this way.

A good deal disheartened, we went on steadily till we reached the scene of the first drive.

The beaters were far away in another direction, and all that was to be seen was the whole string of stands strung out within a narrow creek, each under cover of a clump of bushes. The wood to be driven lay in front, divided from the creek by a field prepared for wheat eighty yards or so in width. A like distance separated the creek from another and heavier wood to the rear, and there was every prospect that the beasts would bolt from the comparatively thin cover that was to be dealt with to the security on the other side.

"Don't you remember this place, Benson Sahib?" asked Shahbaz Khan. "You got a racing hog-deer by that poplar last March. Wah! what a shot."

"Yes, indeed, Sardar Sahib, that was a memorable day," replied Benson, with a chuckle of recollection. "I remember now that if I had not fired at the

second I did I should have had to refrain or bag a Labana. By the bye, where are they now? They netted the wood behind us last time."

Inquiry elicited that the net-men had all gone to the side of the jungle half a mile from us.

"I wonder what is up. It looks as if they knew better than we do. Where is Nathu Singh, their headman?" I asked. "He should have been here to report."

"We can't find any one, oh Fountain of Bounty," was the reply.

We settled into our places with feelings of damped enthusiasm, and had our drive; but it was a fruitless one as far as we were concerned. I saw nothing at all at my end; but Benson, who had been placed opposite the poplar that he knew, was able to see various animals appear and disappear without giving the chance of a fair shot among the thin bushes nearest to him. The shape of the jungle had, however, changed with bits destroyed and new growths sprung up, and the pig were not compelled to break at the usual place.

"It's that blank, blank hare, confound her," shouted Shahbaz Khan, as we assembled together after the fruitless beat was over.

"Another and more serious sportsman would have known that the jungle had grown up differently from last year," growled Ghulam Haider.

"I expect there is more in that than in the hare's appearance," was Benson's comment. "However, don't let us sadden our host."

So we cheered up Shahbaz Khan with reminis-

Drawn blank.

cences of previous good drives, and presently there was a buzz of excitement as Nathu Singh, the old Labana, came with news of no less than six pig in the nets.

"Well," I said to the Chief in the local dialect, "the net-men saw no hares."

"And the net-men saw the shape of the jungle," laughed Benson in English.

The second drive was as bad as the first.

The seats were to have been placed in the centre of a very thick wood, The beaters were said to be far away, so we dismissed all our surplus horsemen to the line to get it on the move when they reached it. Shahbaz led the way, and after much turning and twisting and crashing through the reeds and trees, we got on to a small path that led us to the right place. We waited and waited, but no perches came, The few horsemen still with us were all sent off in search, but the camel-men had got lost in the large wood. Away in the distance the drum could be heard marking that the beat was starting.

With many swear words and peevish remarks we distributed ourselves. Vernon was given the most open portion of the glade, which was only fifty yards wide at that point, with Shahbaz Khan near him next to the river. Benson had the middle of the thin strip to the left, with snapshots possible twenty yards to the front and eighty to either side. I was placed in the middle where the one jungle ran across to the other, and was supposed to be able to enfilade the animals belonging to the other guns.

It was, as was natural, a hopeless failure. Benson

settled himself properly, as a native gunner would, with a small bush well arranged to his front. Vernon tried to do the same, but, being inexperienced, kept shifting all the time from position to position to find comfort. These slight movements were quite enough to account for nothing going his way. I, for my part, was obliged to stand between two reed clumps on the edge of the wood itself, and nothing is so difficult to do for long periods without motion.

The yells and uproar of the beaters came nearer and nearer. The jungle obviously was full of animals. We could hear them crashing towards us at a great pace, or trotting slowly close to us. But each and all stopped short before coming out of the impenetrable veil in front.

On Vernon's side there was more open space, and I was watching that hopefully. "Damn!" I remarked *sotto voce*, as from the corner of my eye I saw a hog-deer with fine horns dash across on Benson's side. Benson raised his rifle, but soon lowered it again, because the brute was too far across, and I presume that he made a remark similar to my own.

I then set myself to snap towards the glade on Benson's side. A twenty-yards' burst gives but little time for preparation.

Crash! crash! sounded in the wood directly opposite me.

I had a vague idea that there was something brown among the leaves five yards away, but before I could realise what it was, there was a wild scurry, and two hog-deer passed almost at my elbow, but

on the other side of a great clump of reeds. It was all over in a second, and there was I, who try to maintain an equable temperament, using words which I hardly knew were in my vocabulary.

We guns gave up and collected together as the beat drew closer, because the crowd was too thick to take chances at the last moment in such stiff jungle.

"I would have got mine both times if I had been on a perch," grumbled Benson. "That fellow, Shahbaz, has no head for such big beats."

"Well! what is, is; was, was; and will be, will be, as the saying is," I remarked, after the manner of our fatalistic friends round us. "Let's get clear of the wood and then have lunch, and Vernon shall fetch up Miss Waynfleete when we move off to the next scene of action."

The natives came crowding up, equally divided whether to blame the hare still or Shahbaz Khan.

"What a jungle!" said Sher Mahommed. "It is not as if there were no animals: the whole wood shook with them."

"It was much too thick for a November beat," was the comment of the rival chief of Benson's party. "Oh, Pir Sahib! offer a prayer to the shrine of Sakhi Sarvar for assistance, that our faces be not blackened before the *Sahibs*."

The cheery priest responded by turning his open palms upward toward heaven, his example being followed by all around him. He then put up a prayer for luck, invoking to his aid the great Saint whose famous tomb lies below the desolate slopes of the Suleimans.

Gentry and peasantry alike seemed greatly cheered by this proceeding, and in better spirits we filed along the track that led out of the wood.

The beaters and net-men all made off to munch their dry bread in the shade. Sher Mahommed had hospitably arranged a picnic party for his friends, and some sturdy varlets brought up large supplies of food.

Our own luncheon-basket was placed for us a little apart in the shade of a scraggy tamarisk. A quilt off a pony formed both seat and tablecloth, while Mallik Massu showed his affection for us by throwing another quilt over the tree to increase its scanty shade. It was fairly hot by then, and, the day being young, we were none of us in a great hurry to move on. The meal was much prolonged, and the uproarious talk and laughter that came to our ears from the luncheon-party near us proved that the untoward events of the morning had not seriously affected the spirits of our friends.

At last, however, we suggested to Vernon that he ought to be off.

"You will have plenty of time," said Benson. "It will be a lengthy matter getting these people marshalled again."

"Where is Vernon Sahib going to?" asked Bahadur Khan, as we began to make a move.

"Oh!" I said, "he is off to the camp to fetch the Miss Sahib."

"That is well, your Honour," said Ali Nur. "His return will change the luck."

We, of course, put it to Miss Waynfleete when

she arrived that it was she who was to bring us improved fortune, but to the natives women are as nothing, and gallantry of that kind was not to be expected in Ali Nur.

We went through the form of cutting for places again, but, as I did a little judicious manipulation of the bits of straw, it was not quite an accident when it was found that Vernon was to have the honour to sit with Miss Waynfleete.

Heaven forbid that I should ever set myself up as a match-maker! My miserable efforts in this direction, as it happened, met with the ill-success that they deserved. I took, however, some credit to myself at the time for the scientific manner in which I had arranged for the two to be together.

The beat followed the edge of the Indus bank for one flank, and ended in a V-shaped piece of jungle with the river on one side and a broadish creek on the other. Across the creek there was another thick belt of jungle, to which it was expected the pig would break. This view was supported by the fact that a strong batch of net-men had seized upon that wood for their lurking-place.

The jungle to be driven was comparatively thick, except in one place which was but 250 yards wide, and would therefore take only three stands a short distance apart. Even there the thin patches were interspersed with denser bushes, so that each gun commanded only a small circle in his immediate vicinity. Behind us, but short of the point of the V, the wood was strongly netted.

Shahbaz Khan, Vernon, and I were placed in the

main jungle. Ghulam Haider and Benson found places farther up on the flank of the wood on the creek side, where the breadth of the reed thickets was greater. They faced a narrow clearing which would be crossed by animals going towards us, but they also had the hope that some would be forced to break across the creek.

I settled my arsenal into my stand on the river side, and then rode back to see how the other guns were placed.

It was just as well that I did.

Riding along a narrow path trodden down by grazing buffaloes, and talking to Sharu Khan, Lishari, the cattle thief, as we rode, I nearly tumbled, horse and all, into a net.

"What on earth is this!" I shouted. "What calamity have we here?"

Two "calamities" in the form of Kehals presented themselves, and I discovered that they had been put upon and ousted by the Labanas and Mahtams in all the previous drives from the best places. As eaters of crocodiles and porpoises, they ranked below the others, who went no lower in their dietary than the animals we were then after, and they, therefore, were only allowed to choose places for themselves that the Labanas and Mahtams did not want. They and their friends had selected this spot as certain to ensure them fresh meat at last, and had arranged their ambushes to suit. They had thus placed a barrier against any animals coming our way.

I was never much good at the more incisive forms of abuse, so I left Sharu Khan to clear the hapless

creatures off to a less hopeful spot, and went on to see Benson. He and Ghulam Haider were chatting away, perfectly content with their prospects of success. I looked down the narrow glade that gave them just a chance of intercepting any animals that might be coming towards us, but its width was so slight that I felt fairly secure that they would not interfere much with our chances in that direction.

"I think you will do best in the creek if you do anything at all," I said.

"Perhaps," answered Benson; "but we shall snap what we can down this lane, and, if we do, we shan't mind you."

To have left good shots enfilading the pig travelling towards us would not have been sound in the ordinary way, but the lane was so narrow that I returned with but little misgiving.

Vernon and Miss Waynfleete were sitting on their comfortable platform, and were deep in conversation. I was just going towards them after getting rid of my pony, but the drums began to beat away in the distance, and I sought my perch, which was about sixty yards from the edge of the river.

It was a wonderful beat.

Long before the jackals were on the move past us, we heard a continuous banging from the left front. A rustle near us, and both Vernon and myself were ready with rifles almost to the shoulder for a sight of the passer-by. We both dropped muzzles simultaneously as a jackal passed.

Crash! crash! came dead in front of me, and I caught a glimpse of a porker passing on the river's

edge. Reed and pig, pig and reed were cinematographed before me. I never knew when to fire, but I had a fling at a bit of blackness passing the yellow of a reed clump, and nothing went on.

Next, with an unholy joy, I spotted two others who, without giving me a fair chance, leapt into the Indus proper and swam across the majestic river. Once the brutes were far enough out to give a view clear of the bank, I started to plump lead into the water, but with no result.

I desisted just in time to see Vernon miss a magnificent boar which disappeared quite close to him.

I should have missed it myself in that chancy country, but I felt for him, knowing that he would have liked to show his prowess on that occasion.

The boar bolted past. I tried to fire, but two reports from the tops of the dwarf poplars behind us discouraged me. One slug threw dirt into my eye, so I did not risk what my cordite-driven bullet might do on a ricochet.

We were all looking to the front again, when another report came from a tree behind us. Vernon swung round hurriedly and fired down upon the same boar which had gone towards the nets at the end, but had been too cunning to go into them. The shot was at only five yards distance, but the boar appeared to pay no attention, and crashed right at the platform on which they were sitting. Miss Waynfleete was so near me that I could see her change countenance, but she recovered herself at once, as the brute, passing through the legs of the stand, rushed outwards.

I had another lucky snap at a small hog-deer that trotted in and out until I got enough view to pull the trigger. The animal was between me and Vernon, but it was clearly my shot. Still Vernon could just see enough to get ready, and he was obviously a little envious of my success. And then disaster overtook him.

I saw him suddenly raise his rifle and fire at a dark object standing in the reeds within sight of both of us. My sympathies were with him, because I could just see the same animal sideways, and it had only been something vaguely suspicious about it that had prevented me from firing.

The result was melancholy enough. A dismal yell let us know that Miles had shot a black dog whose expiring cries long ran piteously in our ears.

A hog-deer passed by shortly after, but poor Miles was evidently too much put out to be able to fire, and it was a slug from the inevitable blacksmith in the tree that bagged the little creature.

The beat ended at last. I found Miss Waynfleete almost hysterical and not at all prepared to listen to the apologies of Vernon. I insisted on giving her a little whisky, which restored her more or less to her natural self.

"I did not mind the killing of the brutes that we had come out to kill," she said with almost unnecessary severity, "but Mr Vernon did not get any of them, and only killed a poor dog."

Shahbaz Khan came up cheerfully. He had got a couple this time, though it had taken him eight shots to get them.

Then came Bahadur Khan in command of the Hazratabad portion of the line.

"What luck?" I asked.

"Glory be to God on high," was his answer. "Benson Sahib and the Sardar killed five. They got three in the brake and two in the water of the creek."

"By Jove!" I said in admiration. "I wish I could guarantee to snap like that down a glade only a few feet wide."

"Well, Benson Sahib is good, and the Chief can shoot a penny off a stick at a hundred yards."

"Poor old Miles!" I thought, cursing myself roundly for my officiousness. We had all done so well, and he, on such an occasion, had fared so hardly.

But then it was that Shahbaz Khan came hurrying up just as we were mounting for the move towards home.

"We have found another boar hit in the neck, stone dead, near Vernon Sahib's perch," he shouted excitedly.

It was quite true.

Miles had hit the pig that had charged the platform, but had been too upset at his mishap and Barbara's view of it to look for it afterwards. It was some compensation, and I tried to make the most of it.

"Will you come and see, Miss Waynfleete?" I asked. "What a tough old brute it must have been! I was afraid it was going to knock down your stand."

But Barbara was off colour and shaken, and could

only reply that she would take our word that it had been accounted for.

Every one was tremendously excited over the great result of the final drive. Benson and Ghulam Haider were beaming all over, and Shahbaz Khan was able to show marks of his prowess to the elder chieftain, and to the Hazratabad crowd. The blacksmith and Abdulla the Well-Wisher dragged the hog-deer forward to present it to Benson's larder.

"Well I'm blessed!" gasped Benson, as he listened to what the smith had to say. "This beats all. Here is this infernal blacksmith we were talking over yesterday asking me now for a licence as the reward of his prowess."

"These people are certainly a most undisciplined lot," was my comment, "and you ought to run him in. Still, I should give him what he asks. The Oriental ruler is always supposed to reward any one who makes him laugh."

Ghulam Haider joined in to expatiate on the respectability of Bahar Khan, Lohar, the blacksmith; and, as Benson knew that Ghulam Haider shot too much himself to want a hireling knave to assist him, he laughed, and made the necessary promise.

"God be bounteous to you," put in fat Mallik Massu. "The luck of the hare did not last, you see."

"Didn't it?" replied the superstitious Sher Mahommed. "It lasted till Vernon Sahib went away and came back again."

"Yes, indeed," chimed in Ghulamu. "That changed the luck for all of us except himself. The hare stuck to him throughout."

As a student of religions, beliefs, and superstitions, it always annoys me when any superstition appears to be justified. I love to point out any particularly big bag got on a Friday, or to laugh at the meagre result of a day pronounced in the morning to be auspicious. But there was no getting away from the fact that, hare or no hare, it had been an unlucky day for Vernon.

He, poor fellow, evidently felt himself in disgrace with Miss Barbara, and made no attempt to retrieve her favour on the homeward ride. Indeed, he fell back with Benson, leaving me to ride at the young lady's side.

Her thoughts were evidently still full of the dog incident.

"I can't imagine you doing such a thing, Mr Travers," she said.

"Well," I answered, "I would not like to agree with you. I have done strange things myself in my time, and have seen stranger done by others. Accidents will happen."

"Oh yes, I grant that, and of course I am much to blame myself for coming at all. One hardly minded the pigs in the excitement of the shooting, but the other was different. I do think Mr Vernon might have been more careful."

The situation was unfortunate, and Miles' depression was not relieved when, at dinner-time, we found Miss Barbara had gone off to bed with a headache. It was our last evening, and he would not have a chance of seeing her again before we left.

"I am afraid we shall have to make our farewells

to you to-night, Mrs Benson," I said, sitting down by our kindly little hostess after dinner. "We shall be up and away before you are awake to-morrow."

Vernon and Benson were strolling up and down outside the tent deep in talk, and Mrs Benson's glance wandered to them.

"We shall miss you both. We like your friend, Mr Vernon, so much," she said. "It is a pity, though, he is not more polished in his manners. Girls set so much store on the externals of life."

I saw the drift of her thoughts, and spoke up for my assistant.

"He's a real good lad," I said warmly, and enlarged from my heart on his good qualities. "This afternoon's *contretemps*," I added, "was most unfortunate, but you must not let Miss Waynfleete be too hard on poor Miles about it. It might have happened to any one."

"Yes, it was a pity, but it was her own fault really for going into the midst of killing at all. She is much too tender-hearted for these things."

We drifted on to other topics, until Benson and Vernon joined us, and then, leaving messages of farewell for Miss Barbara, we said our good-byes.

CHAPTER V.

A "HAPPY AND HOLLY XMAS."

"IT is difficult to lie in court, your Honour," a robust voice was saying, as I looked into Vernon's office at the end of a tedious morning, to see if he was ready to come over for a hurried lunch.

"I don't think this will take very long," said Vernon, "if you don't mind waiting. Also, you may be able, if you will, to assist my inexperience, and tell me whether I am right in thinking it is all a put-up job."

I stayed for a bit. It interested me to watch how my young assistant was learning the ways and wiles of the strange peoples with whom he had to deal. He was trying what was described in the absurd medley of Persian and Urdu of the police file a case of theft of a "male cow," videlicet a bullock.

The complainant, dull and stupid-looking, stood on the one hand, and the accused on the other in the custody of an enormous Sikh policeman. He was a young Mahommedan with long glossy locks and a face that would have marked him at Oberammergau for the principal part in the Passion Play.

"Go on," said Miles to the witness, whose presence

in court had deprived him of that faculty for lying which he apparently possessed under other and happier conditions.

"It was the time of the reaping of the millet crop, and a night as black as the prisoner's heart," went on the deponent glibly. "I remember the night well, because I had a stomach-ache, and couldn't go to sleep. I heard a noise near the byre—my bed was only about a lamb's bleat's distance off—and, getting up, I saw the accused stuffing the bell that was hanging from the bullock's neck full of mud, the way it wouldn't ring. Will your Honour see the son of a tiger?" indicating the bullock which was standing mildly, not looking in the least like a tiger, outside the open door.

Miles declined the inspection, and suggested that it might have been easier to take or cut the bell off. But the witness was able triumphantly to point out that this was impossible. The toughness of the black and white goat-hair cord, plaited strongly round its neck, would have made its removal a matter of time and difficulty. The bell rope, bravely bedizened with cowrie shells, was then shown to the court by an officious sheriff with long greasy curls which recalled the need of our forefathers for anti-macassars.

"I made for the accused, God be with you," continued the witness, "but he hit me a crack with a stick and made off."

"Any cross-examination?" asked Miles.

"*Rather*," said the prisoner cheerfully. "He'll tell you his name is Gharib (the Mild-mannered), but

in the village he is known as Ragra (the Rough 'un). You ask the police what they know about him."

And the deponent being unable to deny the impeachment, the police officer present corroborated that Gharib, *alias* Ragra, was one of those bad characters from whom magistrates periodically take security for their good conduct, and whose doings are carefully watched by the local guardians of the peace.

The next witness was an aged man, who testified to having been present at the capture of the accused by those of the complainant's household who had turned out in pursuit. The old gentleman having, on entry to the court, squatted on his hams in order to tell his story quite comfortably, was promptly hauled up on to his legs by the sheriff, who told him severely to be more respectful.

"I am an old lad," he pleaded, "and weak in the pins. What do I know of the ways of courts?"

On this the prisoner broke into a derisive laugh. "Has he forgotten the trial he got eight months in for assault and battery twelve years ago?" he asked pointedly. "If it is impartial evidence your Honour wants you'll not get it from him; my family and his have been at feud for years. The last thing was, his nephew stole the horse my cousin owns three legs of. Besides, he is related to the complainant."

The aged man, pleading that he was related, but by "shawls" and not by "puggarees," which was his way of expressing the female and male lines of descent, now played his trump card.

"We were tying him up," he said, "when he

suddenly got loose, and, making for me, pulled out bits of my beard. Here they are," unfolding a corner of his sheet; "inspection will show they fit the gaps that are left."

The next witness, a sturdy youth about the accused's own age, with a sharp cunning face, declared himself to be the person who had grappled with and secured the prisoner.

"Ask him," said the accused, "whether his great uncle didn't elope with a third cousin of my mother's. Our families have been at enmity ever since."

Here Miles turned to me.

"You have more experience than I have. Do you agree that there was no cattle theft at all? I believe that the accused was found at night doing altogether something else he shouldn't ought."

"Of course that is it. But don't let the young rascal get off scot free by adhering strictly to law. Our murder returns are pretty low this year, and we do not want them run up."

"Well, what shall I do?" queried Miles. "One cannot well punish a man for an offence that he has not committed, however much he may deserve punishment for something else."

"That is all right, but, fortunately for our murder returns, neither party knows much of your opinion as to the weight of the evidence. I had Sharu Khan before me in an important Revenue case to-day. If he has not gone, he will suit you perfectly as an arbitrator."

Sharu Khan was found in regrettable proximity to one of the minor officials of my court, from whom,

no doubt, he hoped to gain some advantage in his own case. He was, however, on his best behaviour towards me, and I knew that he would play fair.

The dull mind of the complainant gathered a vague idea of our intention during the pause, and in picturesque language he showed our surmise to be correct.

"God is in heaven above," he clamoured, "but you are my only hope on earth. He has destroyed us, your Honour; he has taken the puggarees off our heads; he has blackened our faces."

The prisoner here chimed in, determined not to allow all the noise to be made by the other side. "Justice, justice, justice," he cried; "yours is the power and the glory; yours is the throne and the principality."

On the arrival of Sharu Khan, Vernon and I, after giving the necessary instructions, hurried off to our long-deferred luncheon. We returned to discover that Sharu Khan had transformed himself into the President of a Divorce Court. He had arranged that the youthful Don Juan should pay thirty pounds in damages to the aggrieved complainant, and that Mussamat Rasti, the chaste lady, who had not been mentioned at all so far, but who was named, apparently, on the *lucus a non lucendo* principle, should be duly divorced from her bucolic husband.

Some time had elapsed since our shoot with Benson. We had settled down again in Hazratabad —our desolate headquarters. There was nothing there except a small collection of deep-verandahed bungalows of red brick, some well-built public offices,

and a small native town, all set in the midst of sand-hills, relieved only by a few struggling young trees. Vernon lived with me, and Rutherford dined with us, or we with him, with great regularity.

Rutherford, as I have said, was a good-hearted fellow, though somewhat of a dilettante, and we passed the time cheerily enough. The jaunt to Sialgarh and the approach of the Xmas week obliged us to keep our noses severely to the grindstone, but we did not allow ourselves to suffer for want of exercise, which, in Hazratabad, usually took the form of shooting.

There was a creek not four miles off, which was a sure find for duck and occasional snipe. The river's bank with its prospects of geese and cranes could be reached by three-quarters of an hour's hard ride, while the thirsty uplands in our vicinity provided variety in the shape of sand-grouse, florican, and plover.

Shooting, of course, takes time, and the occasional expeditions revenged themselves on us by forcing us to work at night and at all hours; but this did not matter much, because in Hazratabad we have not the diversions of bridge or tennis that others enjoy elsewhere. Frequently we were pinned in so long that the most we could do was to join with the boys of the High School in a game of football before dusk.

So the time went on, and Xmas at last drew near.

"What are you going to do for the week?" asked Vernon at dinner one night.

"I am all right," replied Rutherford. "I am off to shoot panther with my brother in Central India. It will be a bit of a rush to get there and back, but

I have been there before, and there is a lot to shoot even if the panther fail. What is your own programme?"

"Oh, I suppose Lahore," was Vernon's answer. "But I have no one to ask me this year, and pigging it in a hotel, or even freezing in a small tent in the Club compound, does not appeal to me much."

"I am much in the same box," I said. "Most other years I have been with the Turnbulls under canvas on one of the monster old brick-kilns, but he has been transferred to another province."

However, our difficulties were solved for us when I received a letter from Mrs Benson a day or two later.

"This is nice," I said to Vernon at breakfast. "Mrs Benson writes asking us both to go to them for Xmas week; she writes: 'As we are incessantly in camp, we intend to do Xmas in headquarters, and give some little hospitalities to the rest of the station, so perhaps we can amuse you."

"What shall I reply?" I asked, without much doubt as to his answer. "Of course as denizens of the jungle we ought to go to Lahore and regain ideas of civilised life. I don't act up to this always myself, because, as you know, I have little interest in general society now, but I always preach it, especially to young fellows."

"But there will be ladies and civilisation in Sialgarh," Vernon replied, with elaborate detachment.

"Oh! a small station is not the same thing as Lahore, with its races, polo matches, and dances," I urged mischievously.

"Never mind," said Miles, "I would rather go to Sialgarh. The Bensons are very nice people."

I did not discuss further who was included in "the Bensons," but wrote in reply that we were most happy to accept.

So the evening of the 23rd December saw us, with a mass of baggage that would have shocked an English hostess, seated comfortably in the train, which, at an indifferent pace, creeps down the edge of the Sagar desert.

Bulky as our luggage was, there were few things we could do without. Bedding we must have in trains, and hostesses do not trouble to provide such things where twelve hours is a short journey; clothes of all kinds would be needed from tennis to ceremonial garb; then we had to take guns, rifles, cartridge-boxes and bags, and tennis-bats.

Also it was necessary for Mamdu and Nawab to have cooking-pots and a certain amount of stores for meals on the way, tea in the morning, and for a possible diversion on tour, because officials never know where they may be called on duty. Then Vernon's two men had equally to take a fair supply, because he might be sent off in a different direction from mine.

The first class carriage which we occupied was therefore fairly full.

As the train ran into the station of Khagalan soon after dusk, a series of alarming detonations was heard. Neither of us has any trouble with our nerves, nor did we connect these reports with the unrest alleged to exist in the more sophisticated parts of India.

However, we put our heads out to see the station one blaze of light.

"My Heavens!" said Vernon, "that ass, Sher Mahommed, has taken advantage of the fact that he has a village close by to loose off fireworks at us for Xmas."

"It might be Mallik Massu," I said. "He lives not far off in the other direction."

"Not he," said Vernon. "He is much too sensible to fool away his money like this."

Just then the train drew up with the jerk which only an Indian train can give, and, sure enough, there was Sher Mahommed fussing up and down with a fiery fountain of sparks in both hands. The train was only booked to stop three minutes, but by an arrangement with an obliging guard this was extended to about ten; and in that time enough rockets, wheels, and set pieces were set off to have given pleasure to small children for hours. As for ourselves, we could do nothing but laugh at the sight of Sher Mahommed brandishing his fountains of fire round the beard of the elephantine Mallik Massu, who had come to see the sport.

I could not help asking myself whether I would be held responsible as an abettor if the train or a pile of millet sacks should be set on fire by the fall of the irresponsibly held rockets.

To the noise of another series of detonations we steamed off at last, leaving Sher Mahommed salaaming profoundly with two fresh streams of fire in his hands.

The dreary night journey passed. Carriages were taken off and waggons put on, with the bangs and

A house in Sialgarh.

bumps that only the side lines of Indian railways can be permitted to perpetrate with impunity.

I slept fairly well, but each time a jerk or a crash wakened me to the possibilities of a real collision, I could see across the piles of boxes Vernon tossing restlessly. How the days came back to me when, to see Kitty, I had travelled 600 miles within a fortnight, jolting uncomfortably for most of the journey over abominable hill roads.

I was just dropping off for the fifth or sixth time when I realised Mamdu and Nawab in the carriage with a large tray of steaming tea and toast and butter. They murmured, "Sialgarh next station," and began to tidy up the odds and ends.

Both of us were accustomed to jump up for our early meal at any hour in the morning during the shooting season, so the fact that it lacked five minutes to six did not disturb us. The train steamed into Sialgarh at six-thirty, and we bundled briskly out. Two orderlies in the full glory of scarlet and gold and a number of minor officials were on the platform, and we were glad to see both Shahbaz Khan and Pir Ali Nur waiting to welcome us.

"Well, Sardar Sahib; Salam, Hazratji. I am sorry you should have troubled to turn out so early."

"God preserve your posterity and save your son's sons" (Vernon and I being both unmarried). "To see you is to feel true happiness," replied the holy man.

"Is all well? Are you pleased? Are you in good health?" said Shahbaz Khan in a volley of queries.

"Thanks to your good wishes," we replied, "we are flourishing, and very glad to see you."

I paused, but Shahbaz Khan knew at once what I was thinking of, and was only too glad to be able to have a cut at the rival who surpassed him as a sportsman.

"Sardar Ghulam Haider Khan is not awake yet," he said meaningly, "but, of course, your Honour will excuse him. It is not for a young man like me to suggest a reduction in his opium."

"And what is the news?" we asked.

"What can I say? Your Honour knows everything, and Benson Sahib is very wide awake. The crops are good owing to your presence, crime is at a standstill, and the people are all happy."

I did not wait for the usual "but," and, discovering that the orderlies and servants had disappeared with the baggage while we were speaking, I steered Vernon and our friends outside, and got into the smart conveyance sent down by Benson.

"How funny it feels to be in a comfortable carriage again," said Vernon.

"Yes; there is my good trap mouldering to bits in Hazratabad. I can't take it over the open, or on the unmetalled roads cut up with the cross dams of the Hill Torrent irrigation."

Vernon laughed. "Your ramshackle low car has this merit, that one is able to appreciate a change to a good one from it."

Three-quarters of a mile down a long avenue of fine trees brought us to Benson's home.

"He himself met us in the porch in his pyjamas and a thick overcoat.

"Come along," he said genially. "We have a good fire in your room, Travers. This cold is the more biting because it will be hot at two."

When we gathered together for breakfast it was clear that the episode of the black dog was forgotten, and that Vernon and Miss Barbara, whom he had met in the garden, were on the very best of terms.

"Just imagine," said the girl to her sister, "Mr Vernon knows Aunt Mary well."

"Yes, indeed," rejoined Vernon, "and to know Mrs Hunt is to love her. It is this very affection that she inspires that caused Miss Waynfleete to make the discovery."

"How was that?" asked Mrs Benson.

"It was my tie that did it," replied Vernon, pointing to the daring combination of the primary colours which marks an Oxford Club tie. "Miss Waynfleete spotted it as one worn by a number of men who came to see your aunt at intervals."

"What is it?" asked Benson.

"The Unicorn Club tie, of King's Oxford. We of St Olave's School never forget the wife of our old master, and return there to see her time and again."

The affection shown by Vernon for their relative formed a strong bond of sympathy with the sisters, and the casual discovery made them even better friends than before.

I turned to Mrs Benson to find out from her how many people there were in the small station.

"Oh," she replied, "there will be quite a number for Sialgarh, and we are going to make a regular week of it. The 77th Lancers (Edwardes' Derajatis) arrive to-morrow, marching to Pind Mulraj, and will

halt here for Xmas and a few days more. The Gibbs, our Canal people, are going to Lahore, and so are the Hemings (he is our policeman), but the Robertsons (Indian Medical Service) have got a girl with them and are staying, and so is our 'Barrack-master' and his bride, the Mallets. They are ever so nice and jolly."

(Members of the Public Works Department are still, by a curious survival, called "Barrack-masters.")

I am not a gregarious person, and was beginning to fear that in declining to go to Lahore I had only fallen out of the frying-pan into the fire.

"That's all right, old man," struck in Dick Benson in his robust way. "I know what you are thinking; but don't be afraid, I'll see you are not put upon. We'll go out and look for geese on the river bank, and pick up an occasional duck off the home bog."

"Yes," struck in Master Humpie suddenly, "I'll come too and bring Dinah" (a six months' spaniel puppy); "she'll retwieve them."

"Also," continued Benson, disregarding his son's insinuation, "we'll play a game of hockey in the middle of the week just to keep our livers going."

Mrs Benson laughed, and, saying we were incorrigible, bade us come in to breakfast. Benson and I started off at full gallop to compare our respective game records.

"There are occasional curlew on the home bog," remarked Benson after a while. "I got two out of three there the other day. It is wonderful how well these river curlew taste. The same birds on an English shore are very fishy."

I soon discovered that Vernon, to my considerable interest and relief, was not talking sport, but, rising to the occasion, was discussing the items of the Xmas week programme with the ladies. Presently he distinguished himself by suggesting a dismounted gymkhana, — "sort of deck games one has on board the P. and O. coming out," he explained.

"The very thing," said Mrs Benson and Miss Barbara. "Capital idea. We had thought of an ordinary gymkhana, but gave it up, because there are not enough horsey people in the station."

"Let us know the worst," said Benson. "Read out your full programme."

"Well," said Mrs Benson, "we've got an American tennis tournament on Xmas eve, hockey for you men on Xmas day. Boxing day is Sunday. On Monday the Mallets are going to entertain us at the Club after dinner. On Tuesday we'll have the gymkhana; and on the 29th—well—if we can't think of anything better—I suppose that is the way you men would put it—we'll have some mixed hockey. That's all I can think of at present."

Benson heaved a sigh, and said he was a middle-aged man and fond of a quiet life.

Next day — Xmas eve — the Derajatis arrived. The Colonel came to call with one of his subalterns, and Mrs Benson unfolded to the men of war her programme for the week.

"I say, that's very sporting, what!" said the Colonel. "Shall we get up a paper-chase? We cannot entertain in full regimental style while on the

march, but we'd be delighted to see anybody in the station who'd come."

I saw a gleam in Miss Waynfleete's eyes at the prospect of a hunt, even after paper, but Mrs Benson answered in the affirmative for us all. The two soldiers were next eagerly canvassed as to the form of the tennis players in the regiment.

"Let me see," said the Colonel. "Deeks is away, and I have given up tennis. But Wrench here will play, and there's Hawkins and Barrow. Mr Barrow's hopeless," he added to us. "Captain Hawkins is more than ordinarily good, and Mr Wrench is useful."

"Thanks so much," said Barbara earnestly, "because we're only five ladies. If anybody is really weak and doesn't mind, we might make him do as a lady," she added, with a rippling laugh. "Little Mr Mallet, our executive engineer, has already promised to be a lady, as he is no use at any game."

"Oh then, Barrow shall be a lady too," laughed the Colonel, "but anybody flirting with him will be disqualified."

After that we wrestled with the handicapping, which, with so many strangers, was a difficulty. However, as it turned out, the result was most satisfactory. Hawkins, the redoubtable Captain of the Derajatis, won with Miss Barry, the Robertsons' guest, as his partner, and Benson and the ladylike subaltern took second prize.

Christmas day arrived.

The infant Humphrey, whom a baboo once more or less accurately described as a "chief" of the old block, had been given a drum by some misguided

native, and an imitation double-barrelled gun by Vernon, and was alternately making the morn hideous by beating the unoffending parchment and stalking with extreme caution an enormous red-coated orderly, who, crawling behind the drawing-room furniture, was simulating the noises and movements of big game.

The growling bear suddenly straightened itself, and salaamed profoundly as Mrs Benson and Miss Barbara came in, their hands full of letters, for the English Mail had happened to come in on Xmas day that year.

We all greeted each other warmly and went in to breakfast.

Benson had got his post too. His native friends had not forgotten him. "Wishing you the hearty congratulations on a happy and holly Xmas," he read with gusto. "Holly Xmas," he repeated. "Jolly good phrase that. I wonder no one ever thought of it before. Quaint folk," he went on, commenting on the pile of Xmas cards, some from aspirants to office and other folk, inspired by a lively sense of favours to come; others, the more welcome, from people who could have nothing to hope for now.

"Old Govindgarh has sent me a card regularly ever since I was an assistant connected with his State ten years ago. No doubt his Foreign Office have a standing order, but the old chap signs them himself. 'Hail to this merry festive time, reck not of frost and snow,' is his message to me this year. This"—turning to an elaborate effort of the Xmas

card artist's skill, with the legend "Peace and goodwill," illuminated by a sort of limelight effect produced by a red and green glazed backing,—"this takes the bun, I think. It is from Messrs Jhanda Ram and Ganda Ram, whom I threatened, a month ago, to prosecute under the Factories Act unless they mended their ways. And now," he added, as we rose from the table, "I shall have to wrestle with crowds of polite gentlemen, who wish to give me offerings of fruit and flowers which I won't take and have no use for. You are lucky, Travers, to be out of your district on this festal occasion."

It was a tired man that emerged for tiffin. The restorative he adopted was beer, to the amazement of myself, to whom in India it is a poison.

"Won't you have some, Mr Vernon?" Mrs Benson asked, having failed to tempt me. "Dick is so proud of being able to drink it. He has started a little tub."

"Started a little pub. did you say?" I asked with assumed innocence.

Benson, the cheery ruffian, roared derisively. "Ah! you're jealous. Fancy not being able to drink beer in the winter when you have hockey to work it off."

And the game proved that Dick, sturdy fellow that he is, can both drink malt liquor and be none the worse for it after. He was a tower of strength at centre forward, encouraging the native policemen who helped us to make up the full sides, picking up smart passes from Wrench, the Derajati subaltern, tricking the halves, and shooting two goals out of three. Vernon at half, and I at right

back with a weak forward line, had our work cut out to keep him out of our part of the ground at all. It was a great game, everybody agreed, while we discussed "asters" (as the table servant insisted on calling oysters) and stout afterwards at the Club.

Sunday was a quiet day save for a successful assault on the home bog by Benson, Vernon, and myself. We accounted for five mallard, two white-eyed pochard, a grey goose (*mirabile dictu*), and one jack-snipe,—just the sort of mixed bag one expects in this part of the world.

On Monday night the Mallets insisted on entertaining the station at their house, instead of at the Club as originally suggested. We were to go over after dinner and make a night of it; Mallet had got a drugget down over his stone floor, and we were to sing choruses and play games of many kinds.

We arrived a little late. A riot seemed to be in progress as we entered, and then came a sudden hush. What we saw was the ladylike subaltern and Mallet lying motionless on the floor with a sheet over them.

"Well," said Benson to me in amusement, "it's good to be young."

What the performance actually meant we never discovered, for some one at the piano struck up a two-step, and the corpses on the floor suddenly jumped to their feet and danced fantastically up and down the room, the centre of a throng from which Mrs Mallet with difficulty emerged to meet us.

Benson is a host in himself where fooling is

required, and was ably seconded by Mallet and the subalterns. We were all good friends, and games, the most childish — Blow-feather, Dumb-crambo, and Hunt the Slipper — went down in a way that would not have appeared possible in cold blood.

There were pauses for the vocalists, and Miss Waynfleete's pretty natural voice and Robertson's light baritone were enlisted to please us.

My opinion of Miss Barbara went up a notch, as I watched her, simple and unaffected, despite the fact that she was the centre of attraction to all the young men, Miss Barry being nowhere.

Altogether the evening was a lively one, and it was at a preposterously late hour for me that we got to bed.

On Vernon fell the managing of the gymkhana, which he carried out in his usual thorough, business-like way, taking gladly from Miss Barbara all the assistance which she was ready to give. Now, he wanted a suggestion for the messages in the message-carrying competition; now, she had to select ribbons for him for another event; and, last of all, they had to go and ransack the bazaar of the local Parsi "Whiteley" for the prizes.

Anyhow, it was a great success, only marred by the fact that the men discovered in the "potato and basket" event (won by the nippy junior subaltern) that they had actually been invited to run a solid quarter of a mile with ten stops. Also, Benson claimed a foul, disallowed by the judges, in another event. It was an item in which the lady had to imitate, dumb-crambo-fashion, some par-

ticular game, the appropriate token of which the man had to select and retrieve at lightning speed from a distant spot. Though Benson's partner skipped in the most unmistakable manner, and he was at the trophy table long before any other man, the skipping-rope was not to be found, and was subsequently discovered tying up a dog belonging to Miss Barry, the winning lady.

On the 29th, the blank day about which Mrs Benson was so doleful, the Derajatis stepped in with their paper-chase. It was mostly a male affair, for Mrs Robertson and little Miss Barry were timid horsewomen, and Mrs Benson had cried off on the ground that she was too busy.

It was Barbara's day. A pretty girl, if she be a good horsewoman, never looks better than when on horseback. Mounted on the big waler Benson had given her, Barbara was at the head of the hunt all along, as the admiring Vernon and I, pushing along on nags lent us by the cavalrymen, were just able to see.

The breakfast was of the best, and the Derajatis had a pretty little silver trophy for the first lady up.

But best of all was the delight of the infant Humphrey, who had surveyed the scene from a point of vantage. For days after, his favourite game was careering round a circular bed in the garden at top speed, in imitation of Auntie Barbara, varied by a slow process interrupted by a heavy fall to represent one of the subalterns who had come to grief.

CHAPTER VI.

OUR FRIEND THE JUDGE.

It had been recognised by common consent that it would be difficult to provide sufficient variety of entertainment within the bounds of a small station for many days on end, even for us who, dwellers in the jungle, were content with the simpler joys.

I had, therefore, arranged that we should all leave Sialgarh on the 31st of December, and accept a long-standing invitation to visit Maulwi Abdul Karim, a high judicial officer in the adjoining Native State of Doratta. He was an old friend of mine, and was also acquainted with Benson, whose district marched for some distance with the State. He therefore extended to us all a welcome which was sincere and hearty.

We made an early start, breakfasting in the railway carriage. A short train journey — short as Indian train journeys go — of about three hours brought us to a station within ten miles of our destination. On arrival, we were surprised to find that Pir Ali Nur had preceded us there, and was waiting on the platform.

"Hullo, Pir Sahib," said Benson. "What brings you here?"

"Wherever your Honour is, I am your servant," remarked the holy man with a bow.

We discovered that Pir Ali Nur had a great clientele of disciples in the State, though he had his home and the shrine of the ancestor from whom he derived virtue in the district of Sialgarh, and that the Maulwi had indented on him for assistance in the provision of carriages.

Our host was not there, but he had sent a letter, apologising for the fact that his official duties prevented him from meeting us at the station, and expressing the hope that we should find the arrangements for our transport quite satisfactory. He loses no opportunity of practising his English, both written and spoken, though his breezy acquaintance with Europeans leads him to some expressions which, though, poor man, he does not know it, are scarcely parliamentary.

"The road," he wrote, "is no doubt bloody, but much labour has been spent to improve it. There will be two horses of riding, and one male fitton for the conveyance of your good selves, while your luggage and handy bags will go in a wagnet."

Benson and I had some business to discuss, so we took the two "horses of riding," and made Vernon over to the ladies who were to drive in the male fitton. This conveyance turned out to be an ancient mail phaeton, borrowed from the Saint, who was accustomed to take in it journeys of pomp and splendour to visit the more influential of his

followers. Such journeys helped to fill his exchequer, for the blessings of the holy are not too lightly bestowed.

The "male fitton" was a venerable contraption drawn by four horses, each of a different colour. In fact, there were more than four colours present, for the off-leader was a piebald with a naturally pink nose and an artificially pink tail. The coachman of the four-in-hand was not dressed in the orthodox top-hat and jack-boots. On the contrary, he wore a sheet round his loins, a cellular vest, and a cheap bath-towel round his waist to keep out draughts from his tubby person. His greasy locks, that discoloured with oil the ancient vest, were capped by a few wisps of twisted turban. His shoes were long, and must have been willed to him by his father, while the patches on their soles would have guaranteed his being run down by the most inexpert tracker. From his neck depended by a string a metal toothpick. He wore also round his biceps a pretty silver and enamel amulet, containing in its tiny box a charm against disaster, written probably by the Pir himself.

His whip was not the long far-reaching lash with which the drivers of mail-coaches flick flies off the leaders' noses, but was a long branch of tamarisk, which he could use with effect on the wheelers only. This absence of reach did not, however, prevent him from getting the best of the two leaders, for at given signals two small boys seated in the boot behind descended, ran rapidly to the front, and after administering a severe drubbing from the right and

left simultaneously with similar branches of tamarisk, returned to their places.

Off our party drove with much laughter, with two hurricane lanterns, which Mamdu had kept out till the last, swinging from the footboard behind. As a rule, it is the camel's neck that is adorned on the march with these products of civilisation, technically known to the native, who fails to pronounce consecutive consonants, as "Hinukses."

The road, true to the letter of Abdul Karim's note, was strewn with rushes almost throughout the ten miles, sometimes to cover up sand, and sometimes to prevent the wheels from sinking in the ooze of a depression. Here and there the going was very heavy. Then it was that the driver, ably seconded by the small boys, apt pupils of a fluent master, stimulated his team with a vocabulary that varied from blandishment to vituperation. If a yell of "Drat you, you chicken-hearted cowards" did not seem to have the proper effect, there was a quick change to "Come up, my friends, and show what lions you are."

Benson and I, walking and cantering at a smart pace alternately, found no difficulty in keeping within sight of the cumbrous vehicle. We came up to it at one place where the lions and cowards were having a breather.

Miss Waynfleete leaned out of the carriage to talk to us.

"Look," she said, "these people have sown a crop right across this road."

"Not at all," replied Benson with a chuckle. "It

is our road, which has been made by that old tyrant of a Maulwi across the field. Every bit of it has been made for you during the last day or so. There is only a devious camel-track in the ordinary way."

"Look on ahead," I put in. "You will see that the reed jungle has been rooted up. Native States can manage things when they want to."

At the camp we were met with much friendliness by the Judge—a bookish-looking little man, wearing a large pair of spectacles, and possessing all the polished manner of a courtier of a Native State. He wore a snuff-coloured broadcloth coat, a celluloid collar with no tie, and shapeless gaiters of country leather.

"T'anks Gawd," he said in answer to our assurances that we had arrived safely. "The wind was blowing so rashly that I was afraid for the ladies."

Then turning to me—"It is reported that there are no fowls on the water, but the peoples here are great liars."

"Never mind," I said. "If there is water we will go and look at it."

The Judge explained that he had given orders for the shoot, but knew nothing of these things himself.

"The huntsmen have orders to prepare the 'tups.'"

"The what?" asked Vernon.

"The tups," I repeated with the Maulwi. "In the big shoots of the past, and still on the great marshes of Kashmir, tubs supported by stakes are the things to shoot duck from. Here we shall shoot

from properly constructed platforms; but the East is conservative, and a shooting-stand remains a 'tup,' even if tubs are no longer used."

"Well, there are bound to be snipe anyway," said Benson, "so we will go off and prospect after lunch."

During the short wait before lunch Maulwi Abdul Karim paid a formal call on each of us, presenting fruit of exactly equal quantity to Benson and myself, and a somewhat smaller quantity to Vernon, as befitted the gradation of rank. For Humpie he brought an ingenious native toy in cleverly lacquered wood, and a tea-cosy hat such as little children of the same age wear in Dozakhpore.

"I tried to wave them aside," apologised Benson to me at lunch. "But he said that he was our friend, and not our servant. Of course, as a Native State official he is our equal; but, unfortunately, I have relatives of his under me, and this will give them hopes."

"Yes," I sighed, "it is a pity that we can never meet these folk on equal ground. This, to a large extent,—not differences in temperament,—is the cause of the aloofness that we have to keep up."

After lunch we hurried off to the marsh. The pleasant Judge forced upon us large nosegays of the gaudiest flowers, arranged in concentric rings of roses, marigolds, roses again, and jasmines, surrounded by a rim of myrtle leaves. These were described by the obsequious gardener, who remained bowing in the background, as "button fools." The latter word means flower in the vernacular, so he was not far out.

The Maulwi insisted on accompanying us with a large party of his subordinates to the edge of the water. Benson and I, as befitted our dignity, were taken out to the two "tups," while Vernon was left to do "flying man" on the outskirts. We were each carried out a few yards on a lusty fellow's shoulders and placed on a bundle of reeds supported by pots. On these we were dragged across two feet of mud and water to our "tups."

It was all very well for a light weight like me, but Benson is a heavy man, and the pots sank lower and lower till black water oozed up through his seat of reeds, soaking his nether man.

"Lucky we don't lead the sartorial fashions," he shouted.

Meanwhile the duck were shifting about the marsh, offering pleasurable excitement.

The tups were on the edge of an open piece of water, about eighty yards apart, and we distributed our raftsmen in the reeds on all sides of us. We gave a coo-e-e to Vernon, who made a start by a stalk on a bunch of teal in the shadows. We could see birds rise and some fall before the report reached us, and then all the marsh was alive.

We in the "tups" were disappointed. Birds came towards us, but kept the line of reeds, and did not cross the open water to any extent. Still we had our chances, and neither Benson nor I let many go, and meanwhile Vernon was busy on the outskirts.

A lull came, and we could see the birds settling down on the far shallows. Like a fool, impatient

at the slowness of the sport, I shouted to have them shifted from the places where they had taken refuge. But I was not prepared for the zeal of our judicial friend.

Where one boy would have sufficed, a score had been posted, and parties on all sides of the water plunged simultaneously into the marsh, while from every quarter rose the most fiendish yells. It is true that all the flights made one more round of the lake, giving the three guns a busy time, but, wherever they went, the yelling hirelings were ready for them, and at last they shifted off altogether.

Then came a shout from Benson, "Bittern. Mark!"

A brown bird with head and legs well tucked in flapped across to me. I waited, thinking it was merely one of the herons or other minor birds of the waterside, but, as it neared, I saw the long perpendicular stripes of brown and buff that enable it to stand concealed in the reeds. I could not miss, and it was brought to me looking, with its long ruffed neck and great green legs, three times larger than when in flight.

A vociferous crew in the reeds kept on the move for some time, and bittern after bittern, disturbed from sanctuary, drifted across, until we had a bag of ten.

"It's no use stopping any longer," I said. "Come on."

I got off high and dry on my raft, but Benson decided it was better to wet his legs than the seat of his trousers, and waded ashore.

"Any snipe, Vernon?" I asked.

"Lots," he replied, "but I have left them alone, so far."

"Well, we won't go round now," said Benson. "It is too late: they would only be wild. We'd better get back and come here to-morrow."

So we returned, and Vernon was left to show the beauties of the bittern's ruff to Miss Barbara, and enter up in our game-book eight varieties of duck out of the sixty-three shot, while we discussed with the Maulwi the arrangements for the theatrical performance that was to be given that evening in our honour.

The town of Dozakhpore was a prosperous mart for river-borne traffic, and was of far greater importance than the railway station on the desert edge. The Maulwi's seat of justice had been fixed there; and he presided, let us hope impartially, at the settlement of the disputes of a prosperous community of Hindu shopkeepers,—tiny little men with small red caps on their heads. The Jat peasants of the neighbourhood were rude, uncouth boors, and there were few men of position of the Judge's own religion.

"I pray his Highness, always," he remarked plaintively, "to transfer me where there is society for educated man."

"I expect you are glad to see Pir Ali Nur when he comes," I suggested.

"We are friends, no doubt," said the Judge, with that twist of the head away from me that meant that he did not wish to say much. "I do not believe in Pirs and Spiritual Advisers, and am considered atheist in these parts. Besides, I like to talk English. But,

sir," he continued, "I have trained an Amateur Theatrical Company here, and thus divert myself. I hoped your Honours would come and see our performance this evening."

Benson looked at his wife. She raised her eyebrows inquiringly. Benson understood and turned to the Judge.

"I hope there is nothing unfit for the ladies to witness?"

"Ah, sir, I do not believe in Saints and Pirs, but I love only the good. This will be a Moral Play."

We were all pleased at the prospect, and after dinner were escorted through the narrow crooked streets of the town to the place of entertainment.

"Quite different from going to the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, in a taxi-cab," whispered Barbara, as the policeman deputed to clear the way dragged a sleeping donkey on to its legs and pushed it down a side alley.

"Exterior decorations are a little different, too," said Vernon, as we stopped outside a well-lighted building of considerable height. Gorgeous purple peacocks and bright yellow lions were flanked by painted soldiers, both native and European; but the artist, dwelling as he did far from the land of cantonments, had painted by tradition, and the uniforms were those of pre-mutiny days.

A line of City Fathers were standing by the gateway, and the Judge introduced us, but their names were drowned in a salvo of bombs which they had thought fit to let off in our honour. The wind was towards us, and the lane in front narrow and flanked

with high houses, and we were soon driven indoors by the sulphurous fumes.

"These are very damn fellows," said the Maulwi apologetically, but I had seen a lieutenant-governor nearly killed by the bomb of friendship exploded too near his excited horse. There are little incidents of common life from which it is difficult to escape.

The performance took place in the great courtyard of a banker's residence, the stage being comfortably arranged in the deep verandah of one side. Our seats in the stalls were sheltered by a high awning of thatch, while the pittites sat around in the cool night air.

The banker, whose prosperous oily face connoted the comfort of secured riches, and the ability to scorn the occasional sinking of an overladen grain ship in the Indus, was formally presented to us. He in his turn brought forward his son, a long thin youth with a heavy black moustache.

"My son is one of the actors," he said, in that half-proud half-deprecating manner which admiring parents are apt to assume.

We shook hands, and the youth retired to get ready.

"I wonder what part he will take," said Mrs Benson, as we settled into our seats.

"People personate strange characters in these plays," I replied cautiously; "wait and see if you can recognise him."

The proscenium was painted by the same artist whose yearning for colour effect was so manifest outside; but he had managed to copy a head of Shake-

speare so as to be fairly recognisable. The drop-curtain was also framed on conventional lines—nymphs and cherubs surrounding in approved style the Indian lovers who graced the foreground. The wings were garnished with paintings of extremely plump damsels of marvellous contour, playing on guitars.

"When does the play begin?" asked Benson, after we had exhausted all the sights.

The Judge leaped up and hurried to the wings, and we heard the rasping voice of authority raised in upbraiding tones.

Benson moved along a place to talk to the Pir, who was listening with rapt attention to the harmonium-player. The latter, supported by a tom-tom beater, was placed in the wing where he could also prompt.

"It is all right now, sir," said the Judge on his return, as he sank into the vacant chair next to me. "Chandrawali was not ready. Lala Sukh Dial should not have kept him out to present to you."

"There," I said to Mrs Benson. "Our lanky young friend is to play the heroine to-night."

The ladies laughed heartily at the idea of the inversion of the pantomime custom. I explained that there would be no actresses on the stage at all. "It is contrary to all Oriental etiquette."

"I suppose we shall have to wait while he shaves," put in Barbara.

Just then the tom-tom player showed signs of extra activity, and the curtain rose.

In walked the banker's son, moustache and all, as the heroine of the play. Life is full of illusions,

and if Dick Whittington has, in London, to be the comeliest girl of the Light Variety Stage, why should not a be-whiskered youth pose as the beautiful heroine in India?

To complete the illusion, and to ensure our knowing she was Chandrawali, she stood out among her maidens dressed, in contrast to their gorgeous Oriental garbs of tinsel, in an English costume. It is true that the train of her skirt hung down between her feet in front and worried her greatly, and that the very European bodice was finished off with a dazzling breastplate of spangles which would have graced a harlequin.

We were allowed a glimpse of the fair lady, who then retired after singing, to the tune of Tarara-boom-de-ay, a hymn to the gods, supported by a chorus of her attendants. Then followed a soliloquy by the Blue God, Shri Krishna Maharaj, renowned himself among other things for amorous enterprises, who gave us a hint of what the Moral Play really meant.

It was comparable to those splendid successes of suburban theatres, in which every possible vice is depicted amidst luxurious surroundings, and virtue has a terribly bad time till the last scene. Here the chaste Chandrawali was pursued through all the acts by a long series of tempters, including the Hindu Apollo himself, her own cousin, a brigand, a comic grass-cutter, and the governor of the prison in which she finds herself immured; and only at the last is she united in lawful wedlock to the handsome prince, Ranjit Singh.

I was just wondering whether Indian robber chiefs were in the habit of wearing the garb usually associated with Vikings of the Far North, when Mrs Benson nudged me.

"Do look at the drummer," she said softly. "He is better than the play."

He certainly helped to increase the success of the evening. He had two drums of different sizes, tightly bound together with a gaudy shawl. The tops were coloured in concentric rings like a target, with black centres, ringed round, first with yellow and then with white. The intensity of the sound varied with the ring struck, and also with the part of the hand he used to beat them with. Squatting cross-legged before them, he sometimes struck them with the tips of the fingers, and at others with the bottom of his open palm. He varied his moods to suit the songs he had to accompany; but in the choruses he fairly let himself go in his desire to increase the volume of sound. As the excitement of the scene waxed greater he worked himself up into a very fever of frenzied energy,—so much so that he had to use the short intervals of low music to fan his face with the end of the damp shirt which he wore loose over his loin-cloth.

Natives, like the *habitués* of Drury Lane, want full measure for their attendance, and it was long past midnight when the Blue God, ashamed at the constancy and purity of Chandrawali, turned her prison into a palace, and united the fair one with her own true prince.

We departed after friendly farewells to all, in-

cluding the lanky youth, who had time to cast aside the train, but not the bodice nor the Parisian hat.

The play was much discussed, as we picked our way along the brick pavement. There were none of the corpse-like forms, enveloped in white sheets, that in the hot weather represent shopkeepers seeking escape from their stuffy dens; but there were plenty of sleeping dogs, and every few yards a cow, with or without a calf, was tethered in the open street.

After saying good-night to the ladies and parting from our friend the Judge, Benson and Vernon came to my quarters for a whisky-and-soda, which served the double purpose of a nightcap and of a lubricant to the dust of the bazaar.

"It is lucky that we have no call to start early," said Benson to me. "It is no use bothering about the early morning duck. Their nerves must have been so shattered by that clamant crowd of to-day that they will go at first shot."

"I was inclined to rage when I heard the blighters," said Vernon; "but, after all, we are only guests, and they meant well."

"Yes," I said. "Abdul Karim would be very hurt if we told him that excess of zeal had spoilt the show. Let us take what we can get after breakfast, and be content."

At breakfast next morning we assembled, each with that appetite that only sportsmen can muster.

"The programme is that we try the marsh once for duck," I said. "They may have come in again, especially as the flights are on the move now. Next,

we will shoot the snipe. Then we'll have a large hot lunch and fresh change of clothes before going after the partridges."

"Are there any?" asked Dick.

"'The fields are trampled down with them and no crops are left' is one report I have received," answered Vernon laughing. "Even Abdul Karim says 'there are some or a few.'"

"Will you ladies come and give us lunch?" I asked. "You can drive all the way."

"Certainly," said Mrs Benson; "we shall be delighted."

"Perhaps Miss Waynfleete would like to come out to a 'tup' and watch the shooting," I added.

Miss Barbara expressed her delight, but wanted to know how she was to cross the marsh.

"That is quite simple; you will be carried over on a bed," said Dick.

"They won't topple me out?"

"Not a bit of it," said Vernon. "I will wade out steadying the charpoy; we have to get our legs wet anyway, after the snipe."

"Very well," said Mrs Benson, "we will make a day of it. Humpie and I will sit near the luncheon place, and you men and Barbara can do your slaughter."

The duck shooting, as expected, turned out a failure, and Vernon had to make many apologies to Barbara for giving her a poor show.

"Look out!" she cried in the middle of the apologies, just in time, and Vernon, swinging round, took a right and left out of a small flight of pin-tailed duck going high and fast.

"Splendid," she said; "that was worth coming to see."

"Not bad for me," said Miles. "All very well for Benson and Travers, but I am still proud when I get in shots like those."

When we all got to shore, each with only three or four birds, we were able to congratulate Vernon on the splendid "brace to his bags," of which Miss Waynfleete duly told us.

Leaving Barbara with Mrs Benson, we went twice round the marsh after the snipe, finding all three of the local varieties. Painters flapped slowly off, jacks rose in wisps, and the full snipe leapt with a screech into their fastest and most twisty flight. But it was all the same; our eyes were set, and very few of the hapless birds escaped after the second round.

Consequently, it was a pleasant cheery party that settled down to discuss the lunch, which included snipe that had had no time to get cold after death. Clumps of bushes fringing a watercourse had formed our dressing and retiring room, and we had presented ourselves to the ladies in fresh attire.

"Won't you be done up, Dick?" said Mrs Benson, with the affectionate concern of the devoted wife. "It is all very well for thin people like Mr Travers to preserve his youth, but trudging round that mud must have been tiring."

"Oh," said Dick, noticing our indulgent smiles, "I expect that I shall survive. A bog is only heavy going when the birds are few and being missed. But there were lots, and I wasn't missing them. It de-

pends on the partridges whether I get tired this afternoon. At present there is the genial glow of good deeds about me."

We were all on good terms with ourselves when we put the ladies into their carriage, and rode off the mile and a half to the partridge ground.

"My God!" exclaimed Benson, as we approached a black mass of beaters. "Can't we get the Maulwi Sahib to thin these out a bit? We shall be destroyed by a mob like this."

With the greatest politeness I conveyed to the Maulwi that so many men were not advisable; and though he pressed upon us the view that the more beaters there were the more birds we should see, we managed to reduce the numbers to five men to each gun. This process of reduction took some time, because all wanted to be in the show, but at last we moved off. We had counted without our hosts, however.

The Maulwi, who insisted on accompanying us, had brought three subordinates, "apparently to beat the beaters," as Miles happily put it, and with them were three head beaters not included in the fifteen above. Besides this, a number of the dismissed coolies joined on as the line advanced. They had been kept waiting half the day, and felt that they ought to see the fun. Various small boys attached themselves as we went along, so that we were soon dragging a tail of fifty scaramouches behind us.

Naturally, so large a party could not move without a certain amount of instruction, and our good host had arranged that there should be directors. He

and his three assistants and the three head beaters formed the septemvirate of a directing board.

All were director-generals, and all directed with a vocabulary of abuse which surprised even Benson and myself, though we both have an extensive intimacy with the backchat of the Indus.

On we went, and, not knowing the country, took the strips of cultivation and jungle all wrong, working them crosswise instead of lengthways along the edge of the cultivated pieces.

"Keep in line, you fiends!" yelled the Maulwi.

"Oh, children of shame, keep in line," vociferated every other director-general.

Birds there were plenty, but what with the yells of the Board of Control and the irregularity and length of the line, there were few birds within shooting distance. Benson was beginning to get peevish, and to shout a few extra directions to the part of the mob nearest to him, which is always fatal, and I saw Vernon give up his gun altogether and walk along without it.

"Temper!" I said to myself, "that's bad. Temper's no help to any one," thinking that he had done so in wrath, and noting in amusement that the birds began perversely to get up rapidly from beneath his feet and fly across to the jungle near me, giving me a busy time for a few seconds.

Then I saw that it was time to rearrange the forces. We called a halt, and I was glad to find that Vernon had been maligned. He had cut his thumb-nail and had stopped to tie it up.

"Now, Maulwi Sahib," I said as delicately as I could, "we must take this country properly."

"Your Honour," replied the Judge, "is a great 'cracksman'" (the poor man was, I am sure, confusing the terms marksman and crack shot). "What is to be done?"

"We must work round the edge of each of these strips of cultivation, with one gun in the field and two somewhat forward in the jungle," I answered.

The Maulwi, agreeing, marshalled his forces anew, and off we started again. But the clamour continued, and birds were getting up from the field and flying into the thicket a hundred yards ahead.

"Please tell the men to be quiet, Maulwi Sahib," I said.

"He tells you demons to be quiet." "Children of shameless mothers, shut up." "Husband of an immoral wife, hold your tongue," and similar expressions reverberated up and down the line, while the country to the front rapidly emptied itself of birds.

A momentary lull came, and a black partridge rose near Vernon and towered back over Benson's head.

"Wah! Splendid! Bravo! That's how Sahibs shoot. Did any one see the like!" screamed the coolies in unison, as the fine bird crumpled up.

"Oh, limb of Satan, pick up that bird," shouted the Maulwi.

"Has any son of a burnt father picked up that bird?" "Oh, son of a dog, why have you not picked up that bird?" and other shouts of a like type, at once filled the air.

We gave it up as a bad job. The bird was picked up quickly enough, but the country had again been emptied, and the coolies, pleased at the fall of the skier, and not a bit abashed by the remarks directed at them, kept repeating "Wah! Wah!" and other adulatory exclamations. The birds were, however, innumerable, and before we gave in fifty-two had been collected. The Maulwi was indefatigable. Nothing could get him to keep a quiet line, and indeed no power could have kept a line like that silent; but what energy and language could do he did.

"I am awfullee tired explaining to them," he said wearily. "They are very damn fellows." "God send you death by drowning," he added, rounding on a yokel who was looking cheerfully for a fallen bird quite a dozen yards from the place where it had fallen. "Have you no eyes, you God-forsaken oaf?"

We came to a thick jungle at last.

"There is another good set of fields across this," said the seventh director.

But we were already content, and Benson confessed that marsh and fields combined had been enough for him.

"What a pity we must go back to work to-morrow," said Vernon. "With a small well-drilled line we would have had a couple of hundred birds for a certainty."

"Never mind!" I said. "We must not grumble. Fifty-two partridges now, and thirty-eight snipe, ten duck, and a curlew this morning ought to be good enough for us."

On the way home the Maulwi engaged us, and especially Miles, to whom, apparently, he had taken a great fancy, in light conversation.

"Are you married?" he asked of my assistant.

"No, I am not," replied Miles.

"Ah!" said the Maulwi, in the tone which one employs towards a man who has not made the most of his opportunities. "But perhaps you will wait till you are a Collector?"

"That will be a very long time," replied Miles laughing.

Very pleased with ourselves, and, if the truth be known, somewhat done up, we returned home, discussing with the Maulwi matrimonial customs among his own people.

I make it a rule not to be more tired outwardly than the youngest man with me, and am delighted when I can get a younger man to confess to fatigue. But I have always found Vernon difficult to wear out, and on this occasion he had an added reason for playing the man.

After tea and a prolonged bath, I shamelessly lay and read quietly on my bed until dinner was announced. Nawab Khan and Mamdu bustled about, cleaning my gun, and packing up everything but the bed that I was lying on. The other servants were equally well drilled, and we had barely reached the pudding course when we heard the "wagnet" with our "handy bags" and superfluous servants driving off. Time was at our disposal, so we dined without hurry, and after an affectionate farewell to our pleasant host, we departed in the moonlight over the rush-strewn road.

We had thoroughly enjoyed both the mixed shooting and the curious play, and had no lack of conversation on the road. We were lucky in our trains, —the only trains of the night,—because they crossed at our station soon after eleven, and we parted from each other with genuine regret.

CHAPTER VII.

THE SECRET OF THE SAND.

XMAS is always followed by a strenuous time for the official.

It is not easy to make the whole machinery of government stand still for the best part of ten days, however good it may be for the parts to have that rest. Of this I was forcibly reminded on my return by my native head clerk, a man perfect in the minutiæ of dull routine, but with little independence of character. Depositing some bundles of files on to a side table for me to attend to at my leisure, he produced a separate batch of urgent papers which claimed immediate attention. After running over the salient points of some of these, he said—

"In the matter of the long delay of the Fattehgarh Revenue-free Grant case, so far from explanation, I think we shall only be able to give Government evasive answer."

He went on, volunteering information outside his province.

"Night before last thieves entered house of Station-master Hairanpur, and tore off earrings of his daughter-in-law. The offenders, three in number,

have not been arrested yet. The Sub-Inspector of Police is reported to have taken bribes in this connection, but this must not be given to air."

The horrible budget, of which this was a small specimen, kept me firmly glued to my seat at head-quarters, but I had to send off Vernon to aid the villagers in coping with a plague of young locusts that had started near the Hinjra villages.

That young man was a little off his mental balance since his return from Sialgarh. He sang languid airs in his bath instead of the lusty ones that were his wont, dwelt too long over his pipe after meals, and was more than ordinarily silent and subject to fits of abstraction, in which his face, occasionally, wore an expression of rapture verging on the idiotic.

I diagnosed his symptoms, but let him down gently for Kitty's sake. At the same time, reflecting that his love-affairs were going pretty satisfactorily, I decided that work and plenty of it was the tonic that he needed, and gave him something that would keep him extra busy.

"It is just possible," I said in farewell, "that we may meet on the Indus island. One of the Hinjra villages, Abrind, lies on that island, I believe."

"Excellent," said Vernon. "I shall be on the look out for you. What are you going for?"

"Oh!" I replied, "I had a cattle theft case from Daud Kot, which is finished, but it seemed to indicate that Sharu Khan Lishari, who, as you know, is one of the leading headmen of the island, is relapsing into his old bad ways."

"What! Sharu Khan a cattle thief!" said Miles in surprise, evidently not having realised the farmer's double character. "He looks so imposing, and takes the lead in all important matters of the district. Why, the other day you suggested him as arbitrator in that case of mine."

"Oh! I know all about that," I said. "Of course he is a member of the District Board, and to be trusted in all matters in which he has no personal concern. He has a positive genius for arbitrating in irrigation disputes, but it is this very feeling of leadership which takes him astray."

"Why?" asked Vernon.

"Because," I said, "cattle-thieving is a fine art, and in this big district it is only by constant supervision and stirring up the police that we can hope to keep control at all."

"But why should Sharu Khan join in it?" persisted Miles.

"Well, you see," I answered, "as a man of energy, capacity, and brain, he naturally wants to take the lead in the sports and pastimes of the country-side, and there is no doubt that cattle-theft is a pastime that requires very considerable science. I shall try to convey to Sharu Khan," I went on, "that I want to strike at this pastime by jailing any leading man that I catch at it, and hint that, if there is any truth in what people—doubtless his enemies—say about him, he had better take the warning. This will probably suffice. I want to do it in person, however, because there is little to go upon at present."

We said our farewells, and I settled down to a

prolonged bout of pen-work, including a real, not evasive, answer to the Fattehgarh Grant case.

Some days later Rutherford came over to my bungalow.

There was a tone of excitement in his voice, and a slight cloud of worry on his usually impassive clean-cut face.

"There has been a big dacoity at Chabian," he said, dropping into a chair and propping the tips of his long fingers against one another.

Now there had been, in the two adjoining districts, a number of raids by Pathan marauders, who swept down and were over the border before any action could be taken against them. We had luckily escaped so far, and the only time they had dared to cross the river by the aid of accomplices on our side, they had themselves shot one of the latter, thinking him to be an enemy.

The capture of this wounded man and three associates, added to a fine on the village, the reduction of a headman, uncle to one of the deceased, and other enforcement of corporative responsibilities, had given hope that we, at least, would not be disturbed again. Here, however, was a raid on a village at the next railway station, only nine miles from Hazratabad.

"This time," Rutherford explained, "eight men have raided Chabian, and looted two fat shopkeepers of a very considerable amount."

Detection is a police job, but it is just as well for a district officer to be at hand too in the neighbourhood, because local headmen are apt to work better in such a case. I decided, therefore, to include a

A ferry on the Indus.

visit to the scene of the dacoity in my tour, and went off with Rutherford by the three o'clock train, the slow old coaches of which, on our side line, are not conveyed at more than twelve miles an hour.

A good time elapsed, therefore, before we reached the spot.

As usual, in a country where a man will steal an enemy's shoes with a view to making up a false case against him on some suitable occasion, the tracking evidence was the first thing to consider.

The local police were able to show us eight sets of footprints that led towards the village from a mass of sand-hills half a mile from Chabian. Even we could see the whole series of impressions, though the trackers had naturally only covered those that had clear outlines. Other trackers and numbers of men from the villages had gone off on the out-trails, which led away towards the Indus.

Report came back that all the thieves had gone towards the river, but that four had bent south and four north. The boatmen of the ferry said that they had taken four men across in the early morning, so these poor fellows were seized on suspicion and brought to us.

"Well," I said to Rutherford, "physiognomy is no good in this country, and Lombroso has been overrated, but these wretches do not look up to feats of dering-do. However, the footprints wil prove whether they are in it or not. One canno always accept track evidence in a court, but, if we superintend ourselves, it may run right."

Mian Jamal, a local notable, a camel *sowar*, and

Nawab, the sporting orderly, were with us, and I myself fancied that, after some years, I could tell a fresh ravine deer track from an old one, and a florikan's three prints from the three prints of a stone plover, and knew the birds with a hind toe as well as those that have none. Still, when the baking-pans that had been used to cover up the tracks had been taken off, it was long before I could note where the differences between the four before us came in. The ground was very sandy, and a smudged toe on a long foot compared fairly well with an impression of a shorter in deeper sand; but while preliminaries were being gone through I had collected a considerable number of ideas as to the divergence between the two.

Then a course was well swept and prepared as near as possible to the covered tracks, and the suspects were called to go across this, slow and fast and at a run. Then came the process of comparison.

The suspects loudly protested their innocence.

"You are disciples of Jesus," they said. "Do justice, do justice."

But in a country where, unfortunately, a man's demeanour depends a good deal more on his nerves than on his conscience, we could not attach much weight to this appeal.

The professionals had their views, but were not prepared to be too certain in case the police should discover overwhelming proof that these were the culprits. Trackers, like every one else, must live. Mian Jamal and my party cared little for the police, though, and were able to give their ideas freely.

A tracker.

"We can rule out the small-footed man," said Rutherford, his thin figure bent low over the foot-prints. "There is no track with so small a foot."

I merely looked on, but Mian Jamal showed how one foot had a weak imprint on the inner side, while another had a large space between the fourth and little toes. In fact, these non-professionals were able to make it quite clear to us that three of the arrested men were innocent.

The fourth had a footprint very similar to that of one of the tracks on the ground, so, to make certain, the sand to the side was smoothed again, and he was made to walk up and down a second time. The trackers, seeing that three were ruled out, then chimed in more boldly, showing discrepancies in impress which the less trained men were not able to notice.

Once pointed out, the differences were clear enough, and the whole four, loudly proclaiming our perspicacity, were passed as innocent on what may be termed their feet value.

"God is great," said these simple souls. "We knew it was not your Honour who would take up innocent men."

We spoke to the luckless fellows who had been robbed. The two dumpy little Hindus showed that they had not quite lost their wits, because they had already largely increased the first estimate of their loss in the hopes that there might be some fine imposed on the culprits or the villages concerned. The energy which they had devoted to enlarging their bill was the more enterprising, because both were

suffering from slits in the fleshy parts of their bodies inflicted by the thieves to make them show their valuables.

I accompanied Rutherford as far as the ferry, and, while he turned after the party that had gone north, I went south.

I was met by returning trackers, who told me that the tracks had been picked up at different places across three creeks in succession, despite the fact that the men had swum long distances in each stretch of water; but that, at last, they had gained the stony slopes of the low hills on the other side, and further pursuit was useless.

Accordingly, I went on to administer my warning to Sharu Khan Lishari, who received it, as I had expected, with well-prepared surprise at the wickedness of the tale-tellers there are in this untruthful world.

I then jogged on to join Vernon in camp at Abrind. There we stayed two days, galloping furiously after geese from dawn to breakfast-time, with intervals for stalking, and working the rest of the day and night.

It was at nine o'clock on the third evening when Nawab Khan, orderly, came hurrying in to say that Mian Jamal was outside and wanted to see us. We invited him in, and in he came, a grave, handsome man of about forty.

As has been said, he had aided Rutherford and myself in our amateur tracking at Chabian. He was of priestly family, and, though not a saint of the standing of Pir Ali Nur, the sanctity of his

ancestor being diffused among a couple of dozen relatives, he had nevertheless a sufficiency of disciples, and on their offerings and on the incomes on his lands he was able to enjoy the life of a gentleman. He was devoted to sport, mainly ravine deer shooting, and knew every inch of the country within fifty miles of Hazratabad. Moreover, he knew how to please, and whenever a rarity like a great bustard happened to stray into the Hazratabad deserts, he would come and let me know.

On this occasion he had other news.

"Where have you come from, Mian Sahib?" I asked.

"I came to-day from Mirankhel, your Honour," answered Mian Jamal, "and I bring good news of the sand-grouse."

"What! have you found a drinking-place?" I asked excitedly. "Where is it?"

"I have watched it for two mornings," said the man, "and not a flight drinks elsewhere but there."

"Well, I suppose they will remain till the day after to-morrow, unless it rains, which is not likely. Is there any chance of any one else shooting there?"

"There are no *Sahibs* about, and I left my nephew to warn off any native sportsmen," said Mian Jamal.

"Very well," I said. "We will cross to the rest-house at Kot Maibal to-morrow, and shoot from there. No, by Jove," I added, "we can't do that. We have to be back for the Commissioner."

"That's a pity," said Vernon. "How would it

do to try to get him to join us? Old Marryat is a cheery sportsman, and would love a good shoot."

"I am afraid it would be no use," I replied, "because I know he is bound to go on to Sialgarh. Benson told me so. There is a horse show there which he must attend."

We were a little dejected, because it is only occasionally that the Imperial sand-grouse, with the whole Indus and all its branches to choose from, settle down to one common drinking spot. Of course, the birds of the deserts of Bikanir are bound to resort to the few tanks of the neighbourhood, and enormous bags are obtained on special days. But with the flights of the desert between the Indus and the Jhelum it is simply an accident that one flight after another has discovered the one specially pleasant pool to drink from. It must be very shallow, with a gentle slope down to it from a margin of pure dry sand on which the flights first alight. Unlike the pigeon, who fly straight to the water, gulp hurriedly, and are off again, they waddle, chatting pleasantly to each other, over the sand and down to the water's edge without any haste or hurry, though, once they begin to drink, they take their fill and are off as quickly as the pigeon.

We cross-examined Mian Jamal in the hopes that he would say that after all there were not many birds, and that we would consequently be less dissatisfied at losing the chance. But it was no good.

"I assure your Honours," he said gravely, "that every flight within a hundred miles is drinking at the one place. They come to it from all angles."

"The worst of it," I said to Vernon, "is that Mian Jamal is not like the ordinary native sportsman who tells of a thousand where there are ten. We shall miss a good shoot. But how on earth can we get there by sunrise?"

Nawab Khan, orderly, whose queer quizzical face carries scars inflicted by a black bear in a visit with a former master to the distant Himalayas, seemed to think that this was the time to join in the conversation.

"Where, exactly, is it, Mian Sahib?" he asked, full of interest.

"The place itself is two miles south of Miran Khel," said the Saint.

"And how did you come here?" asked Nawab.

"I came to Kasimwala and rode across one creek, ferried another, and of course took boat across the river, thirteen miles on the railway side and three crossings of the water. The sun rises at 7.45, and the birds arrive a few minutes later."

"If you would like to go," said Nawab to Vernon and me, "Mamdu and I will see to a meal at any hour and not fail you. I will borrow a pony, and Ghulamu, Hinjra, will gladly turn out."

"I am on," said Vernon, "if you are."

"I am not a bit ready," I replied, "but there seems no escape. Very well, Mian Sahib, we are very grateful for the news."

I called in Mamdu to ensure that the wants of the inner man would be supplied, and we went off to bed.

It was 3.30 A.M. when Mamdu came in with a tray of tea, toast, and roast partridge. There was nothing

for it but to get up at once to eat and dress, while Nawab Khan got the guns and cartridge bags ready. At 4 A.M. Vernon was as ready as I was, and we rode off.

The ferry-boat was quite ready, and Ghulamu, Hinjra, was already in it with his nag. Our four animals were put on board and the boatmen pushed off. Fortunately there was still a bit of moon remaining or it must have been difficult to get across. The cold was bitter, and it was an effort to keep up our spirits. However, Ghulamu is a cheerful soul, and Mian Jamal, though always grave and imperturbable, is never out of humour.

A strange boat-load we looked. I feel the cold, and on a Punjab winter morning pile on all the clothes I can carry, stripping them off, one by one, as the warmth of the day increases. My sun-helmet, accordingly, surmounted a kit that might have been more appropriate for an Arctic explorer. Ghulamu had a thick wadded coat of flowered chintz, and, to keep his face warm, had taken a turn of his puggaree round under his quaint snub nose. Nawab had on an ancient aquascutum of mine, with a red shawl round his shoulders, an old pair of riding-breeches of Vernon's *minus* all the knee buttons, and a pair of red and blue socks. Vernon was clad in a rough khaki-coloured coat of the kind issued to European soldiers in India, and known as "coat-warm-British," with a huge collar turned up round his ears, and his aged drab cloth gaiters, much cut by the stirrup, ended in a stout pair of ammunition boots. Only the Mian, who is as hard as nails and apparently imper-

vious to cold, had not made much departure from his usual dress.

"Lord Almighty," said Ghulamu, with a laugh, "the wind cuts like the tongue of a shrewish wife."

At last we got to shore, and rode off for a couple of miles to the first creek. The boat lay perversely on the far side of a belt of sand and mud, and we had to slow down our ponies to a crawl. Nawab and Ghulamu broke out into wild and prolonged "halloas" intended to wake the boatmen, but we had to go the whole distance up to the water's edge before we roused any one. It can well be imagined that neither Vernon nor I liked the treacherous ride after our previous experiences.

The waning moon just sufficed to give light for the boat to get across.

"What time do you make it?" I asked.

Vernon blew on his cigarette and held up his watch.

"Six o'clock already, and we cannot bustle until the grey dawn appears," he said.

"One misses in this country the long twilight and dawn of England," I said woefully. "We shan't be able to see for a long time yet."

The next creek was, fortunately, a very shallow one, and we were soon on good arable land, and were able to turn south towards our destination. Mian Jamal had ridden the course the day before, and it was Ghulamu's home country, so there was no uncertainty as to the path. We jogged along at that running pace between a walk and a trot which is so easy on a native nag, but not quite the same on animals trained in European fashion.

Vernon is heavy, and began to feel it.

"We must stick to it," I said encouragingly. "We can only just do it, and unless we are in our places before the start the flights will swerve off."

However, a glimmer of rosy light appeared in the sky, and we changed the shuffle into a slow trot, and then, as the light grew better, put our nags into a faster and faster canter, till we could see well enough to put on full steam. We pulled up, hot and breathless, on the edge of a creek.

"Here we are. May good fortune attend you," said the Saint.

The creek was almost dry, with here and there a deep pool, sometimes in the centre and sometimes under a steep bank. Mian Jamal, however, steered us into the centre of the creek across a stretch of sand, and pointed to a shallow pool an inch or two deep, not more than forty yards long and twenty wide.

"This is where the main flights drink," he said. "See the footprints. A few drink at the first shallow to the south."

"What are we to do?" asked Vernon. "If we sit under the bank they will just fly clear of us."

"Oh, I expect the Saint has arranged all that," I said. "Let us see our pits at once, Mian Sahib."

The Mian showed the circles that he had had dug out in anticipation of our coming. They were sunk nearly to water level, but he had supplied a good layer of reeds, and provided us with two saddle-cloths to sit upon.

"This pit will just cover the other shallow too, so

you should have this," he said frankly, "and the lesser Sahib should sit by the north pool."

Of course we tossed for places, to the eternal wonder of Mian Jamal. The East is all for precedence and rank, and is opposed to the equality of man.

"There is one thing to remark, if I may be so bold," said Nawab. "Don't fire at the first flight until after it has finished drinking."

"Quite right," assented the Mian. "If the first flight is diverted all the others may drink elsewhere. But once the other flights see the line from a distance they will come to the same place."

As we spoke, and as the unhappy Nawab divested himself of the heavy cartridge-bags that he had carried all the ride, we could see the edge of the sun showing red in the clear sky above the distant sand-hills.

"It is time we were getting to our places, Vernon," I said. "They are punctual birds."

Our companions mounted their ponies, and leading ours away, dispersed to superintend the few lookers-on the Mian had posted on all four sides.

I had remembered to bring an old fingerless glove to protect my hand from the burning of the barrels when heated by constant firing. I had just time to fit on the glove, load, place the two bags open-mouthed at my hand, and bank up the sand a little more where I thought myself insufficiently concealed, when the first pleasant trills of the oncoming flight could be heard.

Each of the various kinds of sand-grouse has its

own peculiar call, which it utters when flying, though a family likeness runs through them all. These calls are easy to recognise when one has once heard them, but it is hard to reproduce them on paper.

The line taken was dead at us, but, while still two hundred yards off, the flight swerved and circled southwards.

"They are off elsewhere," I thought, with a feeling of dismay.

But it was all right. A little swing back brought them down on the sand about sixty yards from Vernon, where they remained chatting pleasantly and moving occasionally towards the water.

Another flight, calling hard, arrived and sat down close by, and a third could be seen coming in. The first batch, after a pause which must have been very trying to Vernon, waddled to the pool at last, and drank quite close to him. He stood the strain very well, though I myself was itching to put in a cross shot at them.

They drank, and flew off at once.

The second flight were not so lucky, because they came to drink between us, and were hammered by four barrels. The other flights were up at once and on the move; and the succeeding ones, disturbed by the repeated shots, came straight to, or circled round, their water, instead of resting first. But, thanks to our taking Nawab's tip, they all followed the first flight, and passed us once at least.

It was marvellous to see flight after flight coming from all directions across the desert. Load and fire, load and fire, was the order, until the guns grew so

hot that it burnt even through the glove. I could see Vernon up to many shifts, binding his gun with his handkerchief or holding it with the end of his coat; and I put a lovely two barrels into a flight that he ought to have fired at.

The pace of the sand-grouse is extraordinarily fast, and at the report of a first barrel they dip and swoop on at a redoubled speed. Still it did seem surprising to see a huge pack of about fifty pass on, apparently unharmed, time after time.

"Lead ahead! lead ahead! and pick a bird," I kept saying to myself, and towards the end I was beginning to have my reward. But, even then, there were birds which refused to die.

Most of the flights drifted away after being fired at, and found fresh places each for themselves to drink at. They had the whole Indus and its creeks to choose from, and, once disturbed from the place of their choice, went elsewhere. But some flights refused to leave their selected pool, and circled round and round, making darts for the water occasionally. It was from these that we seemed to get the most birds, because our eyes were in by then, and they were not so plentiful as to tempt a "brown."

At last every flight had had its drink, and we could see them all streaming away across the desert.

It was only half-past eight when Vernon and I rose from our cramped quarters and shook ourselves.

I found Vernon rather disconsolate.

"I have hardly hit a bird out of the lot," he said.

"Oh, you have not done so badly. Look at them," I answered.

"What is a dozen or so out of all those masses?" he retorted sadly.

"Never mind," I said. "Let us collect as many as we can while we are waiting."

We went on picking up all those near us and got forty-seven.

It was an absurd number as compared with our possibilities, and if that had been our total bag I should have been as cross as Vernon, but I derived hope from the delay of the Mian and our other attendants. We made another cast round ourselves, and got another half-dozen within a hundred yards radius, and by that time Mian Jamal and the rest of our friends began to close on us from various directions.

Then we discovered that, for every bird that had died near us, a second had fallen at any distance up to six hundred yards away. The tough-skinned, strong-winged creatures had carried themselves on in full flight though mortally wounded.

The total bag, we found, amounted to ninety-seven; and we spent a little while admiring the wonderful variegated beauty of the plumage of the birds, to the chorus of congratulations from the men of the long field, who sang, like the Israelitish women, that Miles and I had slain our thousands and tens of thousands.

"God be praised," they said. "Did you ever see the like? Aren't the Sahibs devils to shoot?"

"How many are lawful meat for you, Mian Sahib?" I asked.

"Thirty-three," he replied.

"Then please divide them between yourself and Ghulamu, and let Nawab have one or two."

Turning to Vernon, I said, *sotto voce*, "If you want to know the full number of your bag on an occasion like this, you should always let them cut the throats of the wounded birds, and tell you. Then if there are more than you want yourself you can give away. Otherwise, they will steal, and you will never know whether you are shooting well or not. We have not done badly after all, for only three-quarters of an hour's shooting."

"No, indeed; but I feel extraordinarily hungry," said Vernon. "What is the time?"

"Only nine," I replied. "You oughtn't to be hungry yet."

"But I am hungry," persisted Miles. "Do you remember that we ate last at 3.30?"

Suggestion has a great effect, and I soon found myself becoming ravenous too. We left Nawab to look after the game, and covered at full tilt, with but very short pauses, the five miles that intervened between us and the rest-house by the railway station of Kot Maibal.

Breakfast was on the table directly we were out of our baths, and we railed back at midday to Hazratabad in plenty of time to meet the Commissioner, who arrived from the opposite direction at 5 P.M.

CHAPTER VIII.

A WELCOME INVITATION.

MR MARRYAT, the Commissioner, was a good-looking man of herculean mould, inclining somewhat, with increasing years, to stoutness, and he enjoyed a great reputation in the province as a ruler of men. His fine presence was in itself a passport to the respect and admiration of a race which is much influenced by externals; while his somewhat vehement temper did him no harm among men whose fathers admired John Nicholson, despite a host of arbitrary acts which would have brought that famous hero to grief in these milder days. The peoples of the frontier and of the Western Punjab are in the natural uncivilised state, and understand the frank expression of the elemental emotions, not the arbitrary repression of them. The man who roars with rage at a time when he is entitled to be angry, loses no dignity as long as he is generous when generosity is in place. What they do not like is the man who "keeps his wrath within him," and remembers it long after the offender has forgotten. Like children, they understand being beaten for a fault at once, but are puzzled if beaten next day.

I had got on terms with Mr Marryat in the past, owing to my frank confession of a very serious blunder made in the days when, as is so often the case in India, I had been placed in a position above my years and experience. Having pulled me out of my scrape, he had held kindly feelings towards me ever since.

The station was, of course, full of all ranks of Hazratabad officialdom and gentry. Numbers of the leading men of the distant parts of the district had come in to pay their respects or to ask for some favour. It mattered not if the favour had been refused a thousand times before. It is hard for a native to take no for an answer.

On the arrival of the train I introduced all those who were entitled to the dignity of sitting on a chair to Mr Marryat, who, as became an officer of the old school, elaborately went round making the acquaintance of those he did not know, and chatting to those whom he had met before.

"This takes a lot of time," I heard Rutherford mutter with mild intolerance to Vernon.

"Yes, but it is time well spent," I said over my shoulder quietly, as I went on to introduce Bahadur Khan and Sher Mahommed.

Mr Marryat drove back with us, and after tea walked round the station, inspecting the jail and viewing the external aspect of our desolate head-quarters.

"Not quite so awful as when I saw it last," he said in an encouraging tone, "but quite bad enough still."

"No," I laughed; "Vernon is in charge of the tree-

planting, and he can show you the exact length each has grown since you were here last."

We went on to tell the Commissioner of our good sand-grouse shoot.

"I wish I had been with you," said Mr Marryat. "I know what you both did. Did not give enough lead. 'Lead, lead, lead and never brown' should be one's motto."

"I quite agree with you, sir," I said. "But with such masses of birds swooping on one, it seemed impossible to miss if one fired at the bunch."

"You were quite right not to wait for me," continued Mr Marryat. "I could not possibly have come. I have to go on to Sialgarh. Many thanks. I will send the best part of your bag to Pind Mulraj. My wife will get rid of it in the big station in no time."

We kept enough birds for two days' consumption, roast and boiled, stewed and steaks,—sand-grouse steaks are excellent, — and gave Mr Marryat the remainder.

Dinner that night boasted the usual special menu provided in the desert for men of high degree.

The fatted calf of our primitive *ménage* is found in the products of the Canning Companies, and we did not spare the metaphorical animal. Our fish, therefore, was tinned salmon; tinned sausage came in with the chicken; and tinned asparagus, the sure proof of a desire to please, followed after.

Mr Marryat, I was glad to see, accepted these delicacies, and the accompanying libation of champagne, in the spirit in which they were offered, not

so much as a sacrifice propitiatory to himself, as by way of so much material for a "burst" on our part in celebration of his visit.

It was not until next day, after he had made the most minute examination of every branch and institution under my charge, during a tedious seven hours' inspection, that he felt himself entitled to relax. "I am glad to know now that you fellows are keen on shooting," he said, "because I am making up a camp at the big Shalwar Lake in the Doratta State. The Chief always asks me, as Commissioner, to come once a-year and to make up my own party. I have some other folk coming, and shall ask, also, Benson and his party from Sialgarh."

"Yes," remarked Vernon, with elaborate unconcern. "Benson is a fine shot."

"Quite," agreed Mr Marryat; "I have seldom seen a better." I smiled inwardly, and wondered how long the Commissioner would take to see that Barbara's bright eyes, and not Dick's shooting, were the reasons for Miles' enthusiasm.

It was while I was dressing that evening that Nawab came to me and said, "Mallik Massu is outside; he won't say what his business is, except that it is important and won't keep."

I thought to myself that he wanted to pay a formal visit to the Commissioner, and with rustic *gaucherie* had come at the wrong time. However, I spared the time to see him, and was afterwards very glad that I had done so.

"The Commissioner will receive at ten o'clock tomorrow morning, Mallik Sahib," I said.

"God keep you pleasant!" he replied, full of suppressed excitement. "That's not it. I come with good news."

"News of what?" I asked.

"News of the Chabian dacoits. May my Lord live," said the Mallik, evidently swelling with pride.

Now Rutherford, like the Athenians, as frequently remarked by Thucydides, having gone out in full force after the Chabian dacoits, had returned home without accomplishing anything.

"What?" I said in surprise. "The Chabian dacoits! You don't mean to say so. Come in, Mallik Massu, and tell me all about it."

I soon had the plump old fellow ensconced with all honour in an easy-chair, in which, being unused to the sitting position we are accustomed to, he squatted Turkish fashion, with both fat legs tucked up, and only kept from slipping off the seat by a double turn of his long coloured scarf taken round his body from waist to knees.

A Jat, once set going, is a terrible fellow to tell a long-winded story, and what follows, therefore, is the mere dry bones of his discourse.

"One of the dacoits," he said, in his broad Doric, "had two wives, God save your Honour. He gave more of the stolen ornaments to one than to the other. The less favoured one grumbled and abused him, long life to my lord, and the neighbours got to hear their quarrels. They live in a village near me, and I received news of it. I informed the police, and then came at once to you."

"Splendid!" I cried; "who are the rest of the men concerned? Multan's gang?"

"Multan's gang, is it?" roared the Mallik, shaking his fat sides. "There is the joke of the whole thing. There is not a trans-border man nor a Pathan in the whole lot. Four are Jats of the desert from a hamlet not four miles from my home, and the other four come from that cattle-thieving lot by Sultanwala in the river-bed twenty miles to the north."

"Gadzooks!" I exclaimed. "That beats all." Then, calling an orderly, "Send a *salaam* to Rutherford Sahib."

The policeman came over promptly. His surprise and delight were very gratifying to Mallik Massu, between whom and him there is much mutual regard.

"I must be off," said Rutherford when he had heard the story through, his tired manner giving place to quiet, swift decision. "I must be off to send off my bedding and servants. I will have dinner with you again if you don't mind."

"Certainly," I replied. "I expect you will have to shove off with a party during the night. That will give you thirty miles on the move again to Sultanwala."

"Why not go too, Vernon?" I suggested to that young man. "It is a great thing for a young magistrate to see the machinery of a genuine police case from within."

Vernon might well have replied that he did not want a weary night at a job that was not his, but

he is not that sort, and assented with as much enthusiasm as if I were providing him with a treat.

"I will give you a riding-camel, Vernon," said Rutherford,—"a camel is better for night work than a pony; you can get a better average pace from it."

Mr Marryat smiled approval of Miles' conduct, and was particularly benignant during dinner. I drew out of him the story of his own night ride through the Gomal Pass in the old days, when the border was dangerous and news of tribal feeling important. It had made a considerable stir at that time, and I knew just enough about it to be able to extract the whole story from him.

It was with reluctance that Rutherford and Vernon rose to go. Life is now becoming so humdrum in areas which once were the scene of constant turmoil, that it was a pleasure to meet a man who had done something striking.

"I am sorry you must be off," said the Commissioner to them, "but I shall see you shortly. Fifth to seventh of February are the shooting days at Shalwar. I shall expect you three on the fourth. Bring plenty of cartridges."

Mr Marryat left next day, and after a couple of days' clearing off of my own papers, which had had to stand still while he inspected, I set off on tour down the desert.

My journey was one of immense rides through a desolate waste of sand-hills, broken at every few miles by the sight of a lonely well with its clump of great tamarisks, which served as landmarks from afar.

I had to push past all these, and encamp at the

great villages of the graziers, who huddled together for security's sake as far from their neighbours as possible. They had, perforce, to police themselves and rule themselves, because authority, even the subordinate police, lived at intervals of fifty miles or so. Their protection was the sand, the surface of which told them everything, if not changed by the intervention of a storm.

They laid some of their grazing disputes before me, but in the half-hearted manner of men who saw the Head of the district but once every other year, and expected but little benefit from his intervention.

At last I worked my way down to the railway station of Sheik Raju.

I pitched my tents there, but left the work to be done at that stage until I could return from the Shalwar shoot. I breakfasted at the station, and was ready for the ten o'clock train when it steamed in.

As I expected, Rutherford and Vernon were in it, having run the dacoits to earth.

"We found little left to be done," they said, in response to the queries which I put to supplement the information that had already reached me through the official channels.

I drew them on, however, knowing that energy is seldom any the worse for being allowed to tell of its achievements.

"Thanks to Mallik Massu," said Rutherford, "my station officer had already nabbed all four of the local men. We made a swoop on the houses of the four from the north and bagged two on the spot. Then we wired round for the remaining two, and the Sind

people roped in one for us. And now, like the tale of the Ten Little Nigger Boys, there is only one."

"We have got the case pretty complete, I think," added Vernon. "Mallik Massu is a ripper."

"We had a little trouble with one fellow, but, fortunately, his old pistol didn't go off," went on Rutherford casually, as if such things were all in the day's work. "A truculent rascal he was. I am going to take his dagger as a perquisite in this case."

"I wanted to grab it myself," said Vernon, "but as it was Rutherford the rascal aimed at, he has obviously a right of pre-emption."

"What was the weapon like," I inquired, "that you set so much store on it?"

"It has the most lovely wavy sides, and ends in a divided prong of sharp points, so that when you have stabbed it in well, you can turn it round and add something extra to the other fellow's enjoyment."

"The owner must have been a full-blooded kind of ruffian," I remarked. "It shows that we are, after all, still not so far from the frontier, or so distant from the days of annexation."

I tendered my congratulations on what, despite their modest account of it, was a very creditable piece of work on the part of all concerned. Meanwhile my servants had shoved in all my necessary baggage, which consisted largely of guns and cartridge-cases, while Mamdu was hastily washing up the dishes.

"May the train now proceed?" asked Mehr Singh, a guard whom I knew well, and who attended carefully to the wants of beings like myself who possess in his eyes special importance.

"Ask Mamdu if he is ready. We are," I replied.

"Oh! Lord Mamdu, is your Honour prepared to travel?" asked the guard, using the honorifics which the servant class demand, whether the local gentry keep them up or not.

"Wait one minute, friend of mine," answered Mamdu. "I have forgotten the kettle."

Our comic varlet rushed off to the waiting-room, and returned triumphantly with the kettle, but stopped deliberately to fill it at the tap. He then waved the kettle at the guard and swung himself into the servants' compartment adjoining ours. The guard gave the word, and the train proceeded on its leisurely course.

"Imagine yourself and Mamdu on a tube," said Rutherford chaffingly. But I laughed and said—

"We must take trains as we find them. What is five or ten minutes to a side line of an Indian railway?"

About one o'clock we steamed into the station of Sialgarh. I jumped out of the carriage and looked along the platform for signs of the Bensons.

"I suppose," I said, "they are coming by another train."

"No," said Vernon, his eye quicker than mine by reason of his greater interest; "they have a reserved carriage; I saw it by the points in front."

We strolled to the head of the train, and saw the engine crash on to the carriage in true Indian railway fashion. Linked up by a disreputable pointsman in bright blue overalls, it ran off clear of the points and came back on to the train with a bang that set the whole line of carriages on the move.

Benson, who was half out of the door looking for us, nearly had a limb broken in the collision. Recovering his feet, he welcomed us warmly.

"Come inside," he said. "We will give you lunch. I think there's enough to go round. We thought you might come."

"I have a Demoiselle Crane, cold," I said. "Shall I have it brought in to add to your menu?"

Benson assented, and I sent Nawab on the run.

It was Humpie, of the rest of the Sialgarh party, who first put in an appearance.

"Mummy, mummy," he shouted delightedly to Mrs Benson, who followed him with her sister, "here is Mr Vernon; aren't you glad?"

"Come to me, Humpie, old man," said Miles, producing like a conjurer from his pockets marvellous things in lacquered wood; "I have something here for you." And Humpie soon settled down to play with miraculous boxes, each of which contained another smaller than itself, till the climax was reached in a thing about the size of a pea.

We grown-ups adjusted ourselves on the two parallel couches of the compartment, arranging a dining-table out of the numerous boxes and cases. Nawab had remained to watch our things against the casual train thief, and had sent Mamdu with the cold crane.

Besides this, the Bensons' servants had prepared in a marvellous manner several hot dishes. Sher Khan, the table servant, stood in our compartment and handed round the food, which was passed in to him from the carriage next door.

Soon after lunch was over we arrived at the Junction of Daira Shah.

The Bensons' carriage was cut off the side line train, and we men walked up and down the platform, amid the heterogeneous mass of humanity that camps out on Indian platforms till the trains come in. Old greybeards there were in dirty white, carrying heavy staves; comely girls and sturdy matrons in striped red-and-yellow smocks with quaint little brown piccaninnies; smug babus, walking hand in hand, smoking cheap cigarettes, and wearing neat little skull-caps and parodies of European blazers; and, last but not least, vociferous vendors of hot tea, fruit, and other delicacies.

"How the poor live! Have some sweets?" said Miles to me, pausing opposite a very dirty Hindu hawker, who, taking a pancake from a pile upon his fly-infested tray, was ladling a white creamy sauce upon it with the fingers of his free hand for the delectation of a third-class passenger. And all the while a typical station three-legged pariah dog was keeping a wary eye upon it, ready to make a grab.

Just then the main line train steamed in, and we sought out Mr Marryat's carriage.

There were two men in with him.

"Hullo!" our genial Chief cried. "This is good. Brought the family, Benson?"

Benson nodded assent, and Mr Marryat then introduced us to his companions.

One was Cardew, a Superintending Engineer in the Irrigation Department,—a long cadaverous looking man, of great renown in his profession.

Moore, the other, I knew slightly. Second in command of the Criminal Investigation Department, he had done his share in unravelling some of the boldest crimes of inter-provincial professional thieves. Like so many officials, he was an enthusiast over his profession, and had the reputation of opening a bottle of champagne every time he was able to get a villain hanged. Bald of head, and with shiny twinkling eyes, he was an addition to any cheerful company.

We had just time to shake hands all round when the crash of Benson's carriage gave warning that it was time to get back to our compartment, and in a couple of hours we were at Sardarpur.

"There are more of our party," said Vernon, indicating some Europeans in sporting kit on the platform. "Who are they?"

"Filgate, the agent," I said; "Mauleverer, who is doing tutor; and Filgate's assistant, Vickers."

Filgate, a smart soldierly-looking man with the polished manner of the "political," greeted us cordially, and we had time to take stock of his assistants.

Mauleverer looked just a nice boy, not long out from the University, absurdly young, with a pink-and-white complexion and well-cut clothes.

Vickers was a different stamp of man altogether. Tall and good-looking after a somewhat coarse fashion, he was got up in Jodhpur breeches of miraculous fit, and a shooting coat of perfect cut, equipped with many pockets. Something in his appearance struck me as unpleasant and aggressive.

"This is Vickers," said Filgate to me. "Have you ever met?"

"No," replied Vickers with cool effrontery, before I could get a word in. "I have never been in the jungly districts."

I had heard of Vickers, however.

"Superiority Vickers" was his nickname, and I remembered that his last exploit had been a speech at the Polo Association. Civilians, owing to their frequent changes and movements from post to post, have few chances of rising to real superiority at polo, mainly because they are occasionally appointed to very small stations. It was, therefore, a surprise to have a young fellow of four years' service suggesting alterations in rules laid down by the finest players of the army. The humour of it was that Vickers had been accepted at his own valuation by the meeting, which had listened with attention to his remarks.

I felt an instinctive dislike for the young man. He was "all over us" at first, charging us all, individually and as a party, to apply to him if we wanted anything done; but he ended, so far as Miles and myself were concerned, by leaving us severely alone, once he found his attentions made no great impression on us.

CHAPTER IX.

THE SHALWAR SHOOT.

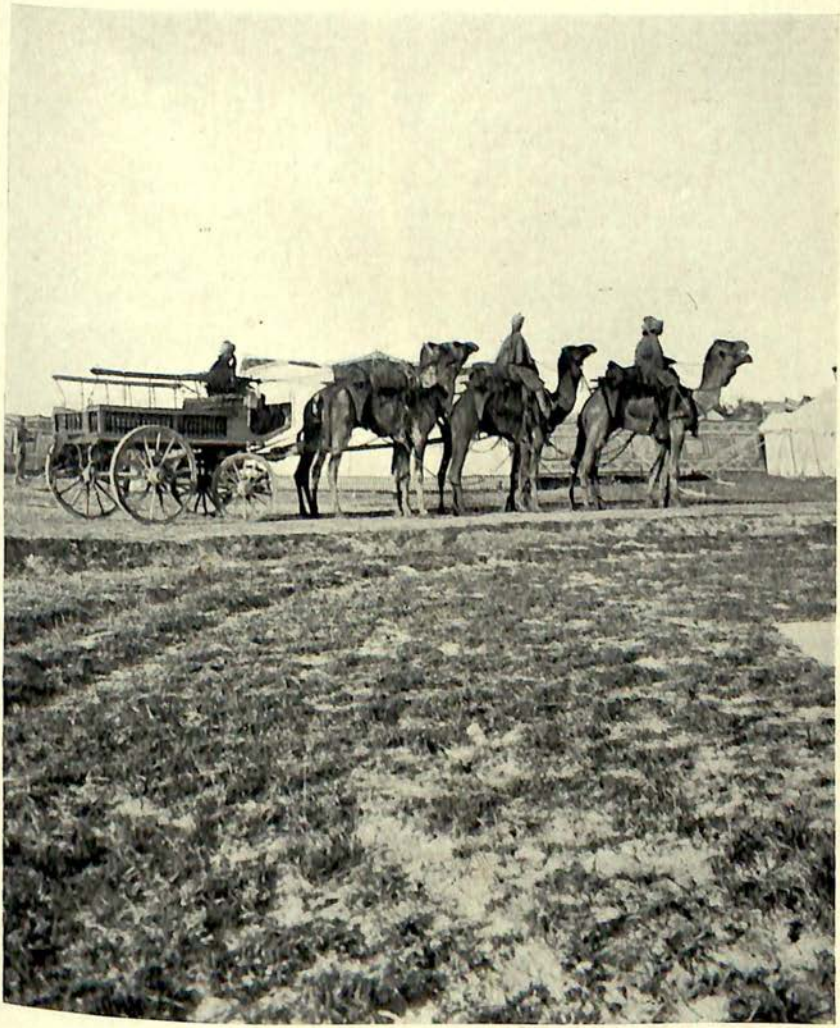
"THE baggage and servants go on the camel-cart," explained Mauleverer. "We arrange ourselves into these two mule carriages."

Benson and I saw to the kit being packed on the long open cart drawn by three pairs of camels, and laughed to see the grinning Mamdu squatting high on the bundles of bedding, while Vernon showed Humpie and the ladies the two strange shandrydans, the one drawn by eight mules, the other by six, in which we ourselves were to travel.

By the time we had got ready to start, however, we found that Vickers, having got himself introduced to Barbara, was talking to her in his superior style, and telling her of all the wonders of the Doratta State; and, in the shuffle for places, it was he who managed to sit with her in the front seat of the eight-mule carriage.

"Come with us, Vernon," said Mauleverer; and Miles had to take a seat in the smaller brake with Cardew, Benson, and myself.

The eight-muler went off first, and we gave it law enough to keep away from its dust.



The camel carriage.

Sardarpur is famous in local verse for five things beginning with an "S"—Saints, Sinners, Shrines, Sand, and Straw; and, sure enough, the straw that was laid on the route for the best part of the ten miles hardly counteracted the sand stirred up.

We cast a critical eye over our conveyance.

The postilions were dressed in serviceable jackets of *khaki* serge, with breeches and putties to match, and yellow turbans with just enough thin gold braid to show their connection with the Prince of the State. They leapt up simultaneously on the near mules of the two pairs in front, and the driver, similarly garbed but with a much broader band of gold on his turban, whipped up the wheelers and away we went.

"Where is the young Chief?" I asked. "Is he not going to shoot? I hear he is a fine shot."

"He has gone ahead to the camp with Pollard in the four-mule barouche," Mauleverer replied. "Pollard is Collecter of Yakubpur in Sind, which touches this State on the south. He came in this morning."

"Is that etiquette as regards the Commissioner?" Benson asked.

"Oh! I think it is all right," said the tutor. "He was to see that everything was in good order, but he will be out the orthodox two and a half miles from the camp,—or is it one and a quarter for a Commissioner?"

Etiquette is always a ticklish thing in India, and not even when a man is your host at an expensive camp is it right for him to neglect the niceties of Oriental decorum.

"Filgate will have put that right, I expect," said Benson. "Did you say Mrs Pollard had come?"

"No," replied Mauleverer. "It is rather a pity, though. She is a nice little woman, and very popular in Sind."

"It would have been pleasant for my wife and sister-in-law if she had come," said Benson. "It is unfortunate that they are the only representatives of their sex here. However, they are more or less accustomed to that by now. In Sialgarh we are frequently without other ladies, especially when in camp."

We changed mules at the fifth milestone, at which we arrived just in time to see the eight-muler disappearing. The next stage was heavier still, and was covered mainly at the canter.

The postilions and driver flogged their animals indiscriminately at every step, but the mules paid so little attention that it did not seem a matter for the S.P.C.A. The vociferations, which varied as usual from abuse to endearments, interfered considerably with our conversation, and we bumped more or less in compulsory silence along through the riverain scenery, until at last we drove into a great white town of canvas erected in a double semicircle round the drawing- and dining-room marquees. A third row of servants' tents lay behind ours; and the Chief and his ministers and retainers had a similar camp on the other side.

The young Chief, a lad according to our ideas, though a grown-up man in the native estimation, was standing ready to greet us. His unlucky father

The eight-mule carriage.

had combined an affection for the wrong side of European civilisation with an appalling taste for native intoxicants. Every effort had been made during a long minority to put the son on the right path. He was a fine shot, and good cricketer and polo-player, but had been discouraged from setting up a racing stud, with its concomitants of greedy hangers-on.

He welcomed us with effusion. The prospect of the shoot was one that stirred his young blood no less than ours.

"How do you do, Mr Benson?" he said in good English, pronounced with a slight staccato accent. "I am glad you have come. You will not beat my bag this time. I have got a five-shooter and a three-barrelled gun, and have tried them both on sand-grouse in Bikanir."

"Wait and see," laughed Benson. "Here are three men from the deserts of Hazratabad too, who are not likely to disgrace themselves."

Vernon and I made friends, as we could not help doing, with the youthful prince. After the correct interval we turned aside to welcome Moulvie Abdul Karim, who was standing discreetly in the background, and who, it appeared, was the officer in charge of the arrangements of the camp.

"Thank you, sir," he replied in answer to my inquiries after his health. "I had a pain in my stomach yesterday, but it is better now, t'anks Gawd. I think you will show every one what shooting means. I have told his Highness what a masterpiece you are."

Vernon and I both laughed in memory of the queer shoot he had engineered for us, and then, with a few more remarks, we steered for the central tent to get some tea.

Afterwards I went with Filgate and Mauleverer to see the butts.

We went to the edge of the lake, which was hidden by bushes from the camp which lay almost on its very bank. A crescent of open water lay opposite to us, fringed on the far side with a small forest of tamarisk. The nearer spaces were covered with coots and moorhens, and in the open were masses of duck in groups after their kind.

We boated along the margin, disturbing as we did so the various birds.

"Quite a lot of pintail," I said.

"Yes," agreed Filgate. "How many will you bet will be in the bag to-morrow?"

"I never bet unless I think I have the best of the odds," I laughed; "but if there are any more bunches like this we ought to have at least fifty."

Mauleverer was a man of books and cricket, and required to have the birds pointed out to him.

"The pintail and the pochards affect the open water," said Filgate. "Those are tufted pochards with the black bodies and white bellies. Wait, however, till we get inside for variety."

We got to the end of the open water and found our path barred by matting.

"What is this?" I asked.

"A fish trap," said Filgate. "Come and see."

We poled up to a square of matting almost at the end of the barrier, and found an enclosed space, ten

The six-mule cart.

feet square and three deep, simply seething with great fish. Our boatmen put in a punt pole and stirred up the water.

"By Jove! that is wonderful," we exclaimed.

After watching the turmoil of the waters for a bit, we found that a half naked *Machhi*, a fisherman by caste and profession, had made a gap in the matting sufficient to let our boat through, and we went on through the water, which was now interspersed with low tamarisk bushes.

"There is 'tup' No. 4," said Filgate, as we passed a platform built on strong stakes and well screened round with fresh tamarisk bushes. Some mallard and wild duck rose with loud quackings as we boated on towards the next butt.

"A perfect place for both vision and birds," I remarked, casting a covetous glance at No. 3.

"Yes," replied Filgate, "I think we will put the Commissioner in that, and give the young Chief a similar place at the other end."

A batch of shoveller, with misshapen beaks and small wings, came from outside and dropped gently into the water near us. By butt No. 2 we disturbed teal, and at the far end where No. 1 was to be placed, tubby little white-eyed pochards had got their home. We turned back, putting up birds on all sides, and had just time to pass the fifth and sixth butts on the fringe of the high tamarisks, and to glance up the belt of water running far inland among the trees in which 7 to 9 were placed. The light was fading, and we were not able to see the four butts on the other side of the lake.

"My idea," said Filgate, "is to put Marryat in

3, the Chief in 10, and to draw for the remainder among ourselves."

"I don't know about that," was my reply. "You ought to have a good place."

"No, no," objected the Political. "I am not much senior to Benson, and he is not much senior to you, and Cardew and Moore have both their respective ranks. If we once start discriminating below the obvious we shall start quarrels."

Filgate was clearly in the right, and the chance was left to the ballot.

Vickers, we found, had been making the running with Miss Barbara in our absence, and it was as much as she could do to prevent him taking her off after dinner to view the comet that came in anticipation of Halley's that year.

"I saw it when I was coming over to dinner," she said; "my ayah told me of it in great alarm."

"What did she think it meant?" asked Mrs Benson.

"Nothing harmful to Miss Waynfleete, I am sure," said Vickers, with that importance of manner and loudness of declamation that seemed to demand for everything he said an audience more extensive than the immediate listener; "the gods do not permit the beautiful to suffer harm."

Miles, not ready enough to cap such a meretricious remark, jerked back his head with a little gesture of disgust, which did not escape me, nor, I think, Mrs Benson.

"We leave the shore at 10.30, and the Commissioner is to fire at the first bird he sees after 11 A.M.," was Filgate's last word.

I welcomed a somewhat late start, and Mamdu waking me at 6.30, I worried on through file after file for three hours. Benson, with similar work to do, treated it differently, and was not out of bed till nine, but he had toiled till long after midnight before he slept.

At 9.30 there were few absentees round the breakfast table, and the talk was all of the weight of shot to use, the number of cartridges to take, and the like.

Then came the excitement of the draw. Vickers drew No. 2, the best of the remaining places, and Filgate 1. Benson had bad luck in drawing 5, and Cardew was only slightly better with 6, because the birds either followed the open water or crossed the centre of the tamarisk wood. Mauleverer, Moore, and myself shared the cross-water. Pollard got the good station of 4, while Vernon at 12, and Rutherford at 11, had the south end of the crescent past the Nawab at 10.

A continuous stream of servants carried guns and cartridge-boxes to the bank, and at 10.30 there was not a boat untenanted.

"Wish me luck and I shall shoot the better. 'Ladies whose bright eyes rain influence,' you know," I and doubtless others heard Vickers say to Barbara as we left. The girl did not reply. Was I wrong, however, I wondered, in thinking that she by no means disliked the feeling of one of the competitors being her knight?

Each boat was manned by five men taken out to collect the birds. We got across the lake by poling and rowing, but, when the rowing time was

on, it was evident that the tax on the supply of oarsmen had been too great.

The position was that described by Ouida: "Bow rowed fast but stroke rowed faster still," and the language used when one oarsman caught another in the small of the back was not to be translated from the vernacular into English.

Moore and I collided at least twice on our journey across, but at last we got into the shallows, and the men could use the punt poles to which they were more accustomed.

All the way birds kept rising singly and in numbers, and went wheeling off to search for other quiet havens.

"Break it down a bit," shouted Moore to me as I got to my stand.

I soon saw the wisdom of this, and, while the boat was poled away out of sight, I busied myself reducing the tamarisk branches to a level more suited to my height. Four of the fisher-folk divested themselves of all but their loin-cloths, and waded away in the water to the four sides of the compass, standing in the shadow of the bushes or squatting monkey-like on the branches.

At the stroke of eleven the first shot was fired, and all creation seemed to be a whirr of wings. Birds flashed on me from all sides, some high, some low, but all going at a tremendous pace, accentuated as gun after gun saluted them.

I fired two barrels, loaded and fired two more, and loaded once more, and again, and then suddenly, feeling my gun hot in my hands, realised that I

had used a dozen cartridges, and that nothing had fallen.

Nawab was as crestfallen as I was, and, as he pressed fresh cartridges into the clips round my waist, he ventured advice.

"Never mind the sunny side, Sahib, and don't swing about so much."

"Quite right, Nawab," I replied. "There are birds enough on all sides. We can neglect one quarter."

I steadied down to shoot in real earnest, and soon won the approbation of Nawab. The wading boatmen were on the move in all directions, picking up bird after bird and shoving them into a handy tree.

Past station after station the flights would go, sometimes high, sometimes dropping low in the fancied belief that they could see a secure place, but wherever they went they found danger. For some time the mass of birds was so great that every man was firing continuously. Then the larger flights, aroused to a sense of their danger, after passing and repassing at higher and higher levels, fled off to the adjoining swamps, or tried to rest on the broad expanse of open water on the lake itself.

The firing slackened, and I had time to tell Nawab to clear off the cartridges which lay thick enough on the floor of the platform to impede my movements. A boat-boy saw them being swept into the water and begged for some.

"What for?" growled Nawab, with the hauteur of the menial in high service.

"Oh! for the children to play with," said the lad.

This is the usual remark, but the fact shows the poverty of the depressed classes. The value of the brass in the cases is worth a small coin, if only enough cases are there. Nawab swept the balance into an empty cartridge-box.

There was much shouting and flapping of paddles by watchers on the lake, and birds began to move about again. A white-eyed pochard came whizzing through the trees, and went on whizzing as far as I was concerned. Moore's second barrel must have stopped him, because there was a splash and angry directions from one boatman to another. A pair of mallards drifted down with folded wings, evidently dropping to an accustomed haunt. I was not to get such easy shots often that day, and they both dropped definitely once for all. The shovellers were especially unwilling to leave their chosen waters, and returned again and again, so desultory firing was always in progress.

Then a furious cannonade from distant guns on the north side marked the fact that the birds which sought peace on the neighbouring marshes had been met by ambushed men with bombs and driven off again. Once more I had to fire so continuously that my hands were well scorched, and I was glad to be able to take up an old hammer-gun that had been my first weapon bought in India.

I seemed to be doing most of the work on our side. Moore was too much at the end to get many

chances, though the splashes showed that he was making the most of such as he had.

"Why did you fire at that, Sahib?" inquired Nawab, seeing me try an almost impossibly high bird.

"I shall never get a chance of practice like this again, Nawab," I said. And, profiting by the prevous miss, I swung much farther in front of a red-crested pochard, not quite as high as the last, and down he came.

"Wah! wah! Bahadur Khan never saw you shoot like that," shouted Nawab, stirred to a pitch of excitement beyond that which a properly trained menial should reach. "I will burst his ears with the tale."

Another lull, another hot time succeeded; but the lulls became longer, and the hot times less hot, until we were not reluctant to boat across for our lunch at the time agreed upon.

Moore reached me before all my birds were collected.

"What luck?" he asked. "My bag is twenty-eight."

"Oh, I am sorry you drew an unlucky place," I said. "I have beaten that. I think you fired much less than I did."

Mine were counted, and totalled forty-one.

As we boated on together, constant quacks between our butts and the open water testified to the fact that there were plenty of birds left to settle in any quiet spot.

The ladies were full of interest and curiosity to know how each of us had fared, and the tent at lunch time buzzed with their questions and our answers.

"What did you Hazratabad people do?" asked Mrs Benson.

Rutherford had got thirty-eight, and Vernon forty-six, to Barbara's genuine pleasure, as I was glad to note.

"You *have* done well," she said with emphasis. But Miles only coloured uncomfortably, and was idiot enough not to seize a chair at the table next the lady of his heart and make the most of his opportunity.

Mr Marryat was quite content with his share of thirty-five. "Can't compete with you boys at my age," he said. "I did not fire many cartridges."

It was obviously not an occasion to mention the number I had blazed away.

"I did not fire many either," Mauleverer chimed in sadly, "but it was not for want of trying. I never was ready for the blighters. They were on me and past before I could fire, and I never got one going away."

"What is your total bag, young man?" asked Filgate.

"Nine only," said the man of books humbly. Most of the older hands averaged from thirty to forty. Just then strolled in, spick and span and thoroughly well groomed, our friend Vickers, and lounged into a seat as near Miss Waynfleete as possible.

"Hullo! We were forgetting you," said Filgate. "What is your bag?"

"Quite a lot, but I didn't count." And the elegant fellow set to work to eat his lunch and talk to Miss Barbara of everything but the business in hand.

"But we must know your bag. Where are the birds? We want to keep the record," said Filgate again.

"Ah! I never thought of that," said Vickers. "The Maulwi took charge from me."

A message was sent out, and the reply came that the Sahib had shot forty-eight and the Nawab fifty-two.

"Good," said Filgate and the rest of us. But Miles wore an air of preoccupation.

It was time to start off again, and the first gun was fixed for four o'clock.

Vernon drifted across to my tent as he went off to prepare anew for the fray.

"Vickers rather gets on one's nerves, eh?" I said to draw him.

"I'd punch his head for tuppence," replied Miles promptly, surprised out of his usual reserve.

"Never mind," I added, "remember that Hazratabad wins as a trio against any three other guns. As a matter of fact, No. 2 is a grand butt. It must be if Marryat could get such an easy bag from 3."

"I wouldn't mind," said Vernon, "if the Superiority showed some enthusiasm, but he takes it as if it were an ordinary affair."

"Cheer up!" I said. "Some fellows pose like that. Did you take your orderly?"

"No," replied Vernon.

"Well," I urged, "you take Buddha Khan and see that none of your birds are stolen, and remember also not to gyrate too much."

"Take my advice, young man," I added, also apparently *apropos* of nothing, "and don't throw away your chances."

CHAPTER X.

SOME SHOTS AND A SEQUEL.

OFF we went to the same places as before, and made ready for the four o'clock gun.

"Have at the hawks too," said Moore, as he passed my stand a little late.

"All right! but you will lose the first rush if you don't get into your place."

"I'm afraid it can't be helped. These sedition-mongers are busy again, and I had to send off a batch of telegrams."

The first shot went off, and I was obliged to attend to business, leaving Moore to swear at the clumsy polers for their slowness.

The sun had of course shifted, and I shifted my position too.

I was not so well off as in the morning. The open lane among the trees in which I had had my easiest shots was now masked by the sun, and my vision was much more restricted. However, if shooting were always easy there would be no interest in it. Besides, I found that, if I had little time to see the birds in, they had no time to see me and sheer off.

Nawab had evidently been talking to the others in camp.

"There are a lot of thieves here," he said to me. "You did not get all you shot this morning."

I had noticed that the boatmen kept making remarks as to the difficulty of picking up diving cripples, and the fact that every bird was not clean hit was substantiated by the loud quacking of a wounded mallard, as a fish-eagle swooped down upon it. I remembered vaguely, too, that in the midst of the heaviest shooting there had been the sound of voices in the distance.

"Oh, boatmen," called out Nawab roughly.

"Honoured sir, what is your order?"

"Let me have your names," replied the shrewd fellow. Their names were given as Buddhu, Miru, Wadhawa, and Sheru, with Sharu in the boat.

"Now then!" shouted the orderly, once in possession of the desired imformation, "take care that you pick up all the birds. My Sahib is a very generous Sahib if you are good, and I have a big stick if you are bad; so don't lose any of the duck, or you will eat stick and not *backshish*."

"Could we do wrong?" came the reply in unison.

All the same, whenever a bird fell, Nawab would call out to Miru or Wadhawa, or some other man whose turn it was to pick up, and there were never so many down simultaneously that he could not keep a check.

My eye was much better set after the wild practice of the morning, and there was a smaller percentage of misses.

The white-eye and the teal gave the difficult shots, whizzing low in and out, just below the tops of the trees or skimming the highest branches. The larger birds flew higher, and the line of vision was clear, so that it was mainly a question of judgment of angles and pace. The pauses were considerable, and I had hardly to pick up my old hammer-gun.

Away across the wood one could hear the noise of the various guns sounding so differently that a little practice would have told who fired. Crack! crack! bang! bang! boom! boom! rang through the air, while a succession of three reports marked that the Nawab was busy with his three-shooter.

A strange sound of rushing of wind struck my ear. It marked the downward fall of an osprey from the blue sky far above. Several times did I hear the strange swish, and once I saw the bird, white of head and with a tail black-barred, rising in disappointment close by me.

"Shoot!" said Nawab.

But I was not in time. However, a tawny eagle ventured close, and I had my revenge on it. A like fate befell a small brown hawk.

"The hunter slays the hunter, and the hunted is avenged," I quoted from a Persian poet.

A little teal sped by. A few pellets struck him behind, and he was drifting to the water when a lugger falcon dipped in a graceful curve at full speed and struck upwards at him from below.

"God's slaughter seize him," murmured Nawab, as the bird bore his prize away.

Herons of all descriptions drifted about, blue and slatey, white and grey. Rails and crakes, moor-hens and purple coots, flitted or swam around. Snake-birds, shags, and cormorants kept to the open water of the lake, knowing perhaps that the banging would have no adverse influence on their health. The large cormorants, with their long necks and outspread scraggy wings, travelled around, looking for all the world like the armorial bearings of a German state.

There had been little time to notice these things in the mad excitement of the morning's bombardment. Duck, and duck only, were of interest then. Not that there was any real deficiency. Hazratabad has no places that would yield in a day the bag we got that afternoon.

"Won't you shoot that bittern?" asked Nawab.

I then realised that bitterns were floating about by the dozen and the score. This abundance was their salvation.

"Too easy to shoot, and we have plenty of duck." Then feeling the good fellow deserved encouragement, I added, "You may knife a duck or two for yourself."

Nawab brightened up and took an increased interest in the shooting, but it soon began to get dusk, and I sent for my boat.

I found Mauleverer still trying to increase his attenuated bag.

"How many?" I asked.

"Seven this time. Isn't it awful?" he said. "They came fairly thick too."

"Don't be in the least disheartened, but have your

gun tried when you can. Probably the fault is mainly in the length of the stock."

"I wish I could think so," said the tutor. "I am such a rotter at the game, I am afraid."

"Don't you believe it," I answered comfortingly. "Another thing to do is to shoot at one of the Practice Schools in England whenever one gets a chance. One has no idea how much lead to give till one learns by experience. Shall I confess what I did this morning? Twice within a quarter of an hour I got the bird behind the one that I aimed at."

"Well, I suppose one must begin," said the lad, "but it is depressing to compare your bag and mine, and I had the better place. What does yours tot up to?"

Thirty-three was the number, a very fair average on the cartridges. I tried not to do the heavy expert, and it was just as well, as the event proved.

As we crossed the lake the boatmen begged us to shoot some of the coots for them to eat.

"Not worth economising now," I cried to Mauleverer. "This is not the day to count cartridges."

At this I pulled trigger at the first flapping black coot that fluttered, at a height of about twenty feet, fairly near our boat.

"Confound it! I have missed," I ejaculated, letting him have the other barrel.

But the gentle creature flapped on unharmed, while Mauleverer stared and the boatmen looked hungry.

Two more barrels, and again two more, were fired, and with no result.

"Don't pole, you infernal fellows," I cried. "How can I shoot with the boat swerving?"

I missed again from the steady boat, and refused to fire the second barrel.

It was Nawab who broke a clearly marked silence. Fortunately, he is not too deferential to speak when needed.

"They are not as fast as duck," he suggested.

The explanation was obvious, but why had I not thought of it before I made seven misses in the presence of a beginner? The lead given to the duck flying at full speed sent a spread of shot well short of the nose of the mild coots with their sluggish flight.

A cormorant going somewhat faster saved the situation, or I expect I should have missed again. It fell into the lake apparently stone dead, and a groan came up from the virtuous boatmen, who, as pious Mahommedans, could only eat that which had died with a knife in the throat. It flapped a wing feebly, and a rush was made at Sharu, the youngest member of the community. One knocked his turban off, another grabbed his shirt, and in a second he would have been without a stitch but that Wadhawa in his excitement heaved him bodily into the water.

"Our bird," yelled the remaining four at Maul-everer's men, seeing signs of their bearing down on the prize.

The boy was hardly back when he had to fetch a right and left of coots, none of the other men showing the least sign of wishing to assist him. That sufficed, and we got back to the landing-stage.

We made our way to the dining-tent, and over

whiskies and sodas discussed the total bag, and tried to sort it.

Four hundred and forty-nine in the morning, and two hundred and ninety-three in the afternoon, made quite a nice total.

"How many pintail are there?" asked Filgate. "I think Travers said fifty."

I laughed. "I shot none. I saw a few in the sky five minutes after the start."

The bags were searched, and one and one only could be found. Rutherford, who had shot it, handed it over for the ladies' inspection.

There were practically no pochard either except the white-eyes.

"Isn't it curious how the birds will stick to their own type of water?" said Benson. "I got at least three-quarters gadwall."

"Mine were mainly mallard," said the Commissioner.

"It is fortunate," Moore said, "that we have more than we can eat. I should have been sick of all my shovellers in the ordinary way. They fly well enough all the same."

Miles was looking fairly satisfied.

"Did you get any spot-billed?" he asked; but no one except the guns in his vicinity had seen any.

"I have never seen one. Which are they?" asked Mauleverer.

Vernon produced one of these handsome birds, which boast black bills spotted with red at the base and yellow at the tip.

The young Nawab still topped the score, and his satellites produced forty.

Hazratabad showed up well with ninety for the three of us, though the best individual score was Mr Marryat's.

"They came in well at the finish," he said, "and I took you boys' tip of firing more. It is a mistake in the ordinary way, though."

I did not agree in my heart, because, in shooting, as in war, every hit cannot be a fatal one. However, that was not the time to say so.

Vickers, for some reason which, in his "nothing-really-matters" style, he did not condescend to explain, had only got twenty-five.

Vernon came back with me to dress for dinner. I was surprised that he was not elated over his bag, which totalled thirty-two, well above the average, but the reason soon became clear.

"Do you know that that blighter loafed home at five to afternoon tea?" said Miles, intolerantly.

"What blighter?" I asked with an air of innocence.

"The Superiority, of course," replied my young man.

"Oh, well, what does it matter?" I said. "It argues a rotten spirit, when a man is really good at a thing if he is slack over it."

"I know women like that sort of feeble attention," said Miles, "but I can't achieve the unnatural myself. I had to go on shooting."

"Quite right," I agreed, but I knew too that women are queer folk, and like the outward and visible signs of attention; and the lad, who had derived evident satisfaction from his creditable shooting of the afternoon, had seemed to lose ground again to his readier and more facile rival.

Unfortunately, as the evening went on, Vickers seemed to be still gaining ground. Some one remembered that he was a genius at card tricks, and I must own that I have seldom seen an amateur to equal him. He kept us all amused, and, although Barbara was singled out as usual for all the pretty speeches and palaver, it was done with a slightly more deferential air which appeared to carry weight with the girl. I began to realise that Vernon's rival was bringing brain to bear on the subject of a possible conquest, and that matters were becoming more serious.

"Poisonous young pup," whispered Moore to me, as he watched Vickers' efforts as a society entertainer. "Your boy is worth ten of him. I hear, by the way, though," he added, "that he is the best shot of us all here."

"Oh," I said, "he certainly did shoot excellently, but who told you that he was the best?"

"I have it," said Moore, with an air of great seriousness, "on the best possible authority — the man himself;" and he moved away with a burst of satiric laughter.

Vernon, of course, after standing about on the outskirts of the throng, was called upon by Mr Marryat to make up a table at Bridge. There he proceeded to finesse and lose a trick where he must have got game without the finesse, and he would have revoked a little later had not his partner challenged him in time.

I did not at all like the turn affairs were taking. One could not deny that the honours of that day at

least had rested with Vickers, and I went to bed wondering sleepily if there was no way in which I could help on my young assistant.

Pretty Miss Barbara was fast working her way into my regard, and the thought of her being dazzled by the cheap attractions of Vickers irritated me strangely.

CHAPTER XI.

FEATHERS AND FROTH.

"THIS camping-place seems dry enough," remarked Vernon at breakfast next morning, "but I suppose the air near the lake must be full of damp. I seem to have got a bad go of rheumatics."

I looked across at the Commissioner, and detected an answering twinkle in his eye, but he turned to Vernon with a sympathetic air.

"Where do you feel it worst? In the neck?"

"Yes, and all round the top of my shoulders. It is a curious feeling, and quite unlike anything I have experienced before."

"I feel the same too," complained Mauleverer. "I wonder what it is. I took my temperature thinking it was a return of a bout of fever. But why are you all laughing?" seeing smiles on the faces of the older hands.

"That's not rheumatism," roared Marryat. "How often, in ordinary life, do you exercise the muscles of the neck and shoulders as you did yesterday, turning from side to side and swinging a seven-pound weight?"

The ladies displayed true feminine concern at the discomfort of the young men, and were ready with offers of liniments and embrocations.

"How are you feeling, Mr Vickers?" said Mrs Benson, after sympathising duly with Vernon and the tutor.

"Oh, I'm not as soft as all that," was the scornful reply, but the very tall collar that he had chosen to wear seemed to have been selected to cover any stiffness of attitude.

It had seemed to me from the moment that I first saw Vickers that he was beyond the reach of scarcasm. Still I was glad to hear Marryat, Cardew, and Filgate significantly tell tales of their own early shooting trials in a tone that implied their disbelief in the greater immunity of Vickers.

"What's our programme for to-day?" asked the Commissioner, changing the subject.

Vickers, by no means abashed, spoke for his superior.

"We give the lake a rest to-day. The birds won't stand hammering two days in succession."

"Yes," said Filgate, "we will have a couple of beats after black partridge. There are plenty of them, and they at any rate cannot seek safety in the Indus. Who is for going out?"

It was curious how many of us found that we must dispose of some work. Moore, poor fellow, had to get off in the afternoon, bound for the other half of India in connection with some seditious gentry who had overstepped the patience even of the long-suffering Government of India.

Both Benson and I made excuses, while Mauleverer had shamefacedly to explain that, apart from his stiffness, his shoulder was terribly bruised.

"Why don't you pad yourself?" said Filgate. "You must remember that next time. I always wear a light vest neatly folded over my shoulder on big days like these."

"I carry a thin towel," added Cardew, while others were ready to confess to similar protection.

"Do you really mean that?" asked Mauleverer, who knew only too well that he was a ready subject for a leg-pull.

"Oh, it's quite correct," Filgate assured him. "A thin twill shirt and coat of light material are not the same as an English Norfolk jacket and thick clothing below."

"But I thought one should not get any injury at all?" said the boy doubtfully. "My bruises were probably all due to my holding badly."

I reminded him consolingly that some hundred minute taps have a cumulative effect on a practically unprotected shoulder.

"What is the matter with you all?" jeered Mr Marryat, as excuses became somewhat numerous. "You are a pack of shirkers. I am going anyway."

There were enough to make up two small parties; and, with a parting shot at me for being *blasé*, the Commissioner headed a move off, after calling for his brown retriever.

I was not *blasé*, but I really had to try to keep pace with the papers that had been accumulating during my tour in the desert, and, after all, there

were partridges in Hazratabad. It was the duck shooting that I could not afford to miss.

"I hope you ladies don't find this too dull?" I said to Mrs Benson, as Benson and I prepared to go off to our files. "I am afraid we men think and talk of little beside our sport."

"Oh no, we are not in the least dull. We felt complimented at being invited to join the party at all. Women have far more resources than you think."

"Well, what could you find with which to fill a long lonely day like yesterday?" I persisted.

"Oh, you might laugh at what we were doing yesterday, although we found it tremendously absorbing. We were making buttons out of bootlaces. It is the latest feminine craze in Sialgarh, and takes up a good deal of time. Still, the buttons are very pretty and very serviceable when finished."

"And you don't mention that the finished product of these hours of toil has a market value of about sixpence," guffawed Benson.

Mrs Benson treated her husband's remark with scorn, and went on to tell me how, with their sketching, photography, and letter-writing, she and Barbara were never at a loss to dispose of their time. "And besides, there is always Humpie," she finished triumphantly.

I went off to my papers, and scarcely looked up till Vernon came in just as the luncheon gong sounded. He was accustomed to come to me to relieve his feelings, and this appeared to be an occasion for doing so.

"Had good sport?" I asked. "Plenty of birds, I suppose?"

"Oh, there were plenty of birds all right," said Miles irritably, "but what could I do? I was placed between Vickers and Marryat. Marryat claimed all doubtful birds as his, and that accursed dog of his retrieved a lot more that there was no dispute over, and they were never given up again."

"Well! well! That ought not to perturb you," I urged. "You must stick to our Hazratabad principle of not counting separate bags where the shooters are together."

"Yes, I know," said Miles. "I should not have been upset at that alone. Marryat is a cheery old boy, and grabs the birds so good-naturedly that I would not have minded him by himself, but it was the combination of Vickers with him that finished me up."

"Why, what did Vickers do?"

"Well, if there is one thing that we do know about in Hazratabad, it is partridge-shooting," said Miles, "and you have taught me how to dress the line, but that blighter was always anywhere except where he ought to have been. One never knew whether to fire or not. After a time Marryat started railing at him, but he took no notice whatever."

"Did he get any shooting?"

"Oh yes, he lost any number of chances, but he is a fine shot, and hit most of the possible birds. But you know what partridge-shooting is in reed thickets. Beaters beat badly, and let birds go back; those that one does hit are not picked

up; when one is trying to pick a bird up, others rise and are missed."

"So, with Marryat and Vickers added to the ordinary aggravations of partridge-shooting, your temper came off worse than the birds," I girded.

Vernon relaxed into his usual good-natured smile, and we went in to lunch.

The great luncheon tent, gorgeously draped with strong patterns of terra cotta and dark blue, was already nearly full. Miss Barbara had Vickers, of course, on one side, and old Cardew on the other. Despite the latter's thirst for the blood of murderers and dacoits, he had not lost his humanity, and loved to bask in the smiles of a pretty girl, especially one who, like Barbara, could find interest in any topic, however official.

I settled down into an elaborately gilt chair, leaving Miles to drift down among the other men.

Servants wearing, on belt and turban, a large gilt buckle carrying the crest of the State, paid attention to our needs, moving noiselessly with bare feet over the soft pile of the costly carpets that covered the floor.

"How busy the Maulwi must have been. Everything is beautifully arranged," said Mrs Benson, with a woman's appreciation of successful attention to detail.

"Yes, I expect he will be glad to get back to his judicial cases. Officials of Native States, as with us, find themselves put on to all kinds of jobs."

"Oh, by the way, Mr Travers," went on Mrs Benson, "Mr Vickers tells us there is a lovely bird

farm here. Do help him to escort us over there this afternoon."

I murmured something about my files, and cast about for a chance to make Miles my deputy, but Mrs Benson did not intend to let me off.

"We won't go till after an early cup of tea," she said, "and I am sure you will have done more than enough work by then. You know we never object to your disappearing so soon after dinner either, though some ladies might take that as a slight."

"Oh, so Vickers is shirking this time," said Mr Marryat. "Well, you must come again, Vernon, anyway. I got a fine bag with you this morning."

My eye caught Vernon's, as I remembered his version of how Mr Marryat's bag had been increased, but there was not the corresponding twinkle that there ought to have been.

However, the Commissioner evidently approved of Miles, and there was no escape for him.

I left the luncheon table to get on with my work, but, an idea striking me, I hurried back to give Vernon an opening.

"Please ask Miss Waynfleete to take some photos of the camp, and make her promise copies to me. I should like to help her, but I must bolt if I am to go to the bird farm."

This seemed to be more or less of a success, and I saw from the reed verandah of my tent much discussion between Miles and his lady as to distances, pace, and angle. So when my young man had to start off in the conveyance with the others, he appeared more reconciled.

"Tea is ready, Sahib," said Mamdu at last, and I had to go over for my escort duty. If I had not been able to put Miles in my place, I determined to do my best to try to ride off Vickers.

The Maulwi Sahib had told himself off to accompany us. Vickers was resplendent in a fancy waistcoat and smart tie, and had, evidently, spent much time since lunch on his personal appearance.

Mrs Benson and Miss Waynfleete being ready, we started across the lake.

"I hope you find everything right in your camp," suddenly remarked the Maulwi to Mrs Benson. In his capacity as manager of the camp he was, like Martha, cumbered with much serving.

"Yes, indeed," replied Mrs Benson, "it's all delightful, thank you."

"But what about your beds?" urged the Maulwi.

"Oh! they are quite all right," she replied. "Why, mine even has gold-plated legs, I think."

"Yes," said the Maulwi gloomily, thinking of the watchmen who had been in the tents before our party arrived, "but Gawd knows who has been sleeping in them."

The poor man's conversation became too much for Miss Barbara, whose shoulders shook as she turned away to hide her laughter, but Mrs Benson with ready kindliness drew off the Maulwi's attention with questions about the farm which we were just reaching.

On a dry spot facing the lake, but backed by the bushes, and surrounded by shallow water, stood a number of reed huts. Some of those were occupied

Crossing the lake.

by the humble folk employed on the lake, half fishermen, half gamekeepers, but the others were merely long, low sheds of mats for the birds.

"Now you know where your aigrettes come from, Mrs Benson," I said, as we looked inside a dark shed full of slender white birds. "These are the lesser white herons which provide them for you."

"Which are the feathers used?" asked Mrs Benson.

I made a gesture to a youth, who picked up one of the little creatures and held it for our inspection, and the delicate white feathers on its neck and back were easily recognisable.

"Is it really true that they are plucked out from the living bird?" inquired Miss Barbara with some concern.

"Of course," broke in Vickers, carelessly. "They do fall off of their own accord, but they might be spoiled that way. However, they are taken when they must be loose, so it is not much to trouble about."

"Well, that may be, but still I don't think I shall wear aigrettes in future," said Barbara, and Mrs Benson agreed with her. "One doesn't realise the barbarity of these things," she said, "until one is brought face to face with it." And after further admiring the birds we passed on.

Grey cranes were stalking about contentedly and free among the bushes. The head fisherman, whose beard had been dyed a yellowish red, picked up one and held it under his arm much as the Duchess held the flamingo in the well-known croquet game in 'Alice.'

"I thought their eyes were red," said Barbara.

"No, it is the Demoiselles that have the fiery eyes and the black necks with long pointed feathers. These are marked by the delicate dorsal plumes. Our people of Hazratabad catch them at night with slings, and make dusters of the tails. If I can get a plain one I will send it on to you. The natives spoil them by dyeing them into the most horrible combinations of purples, blues, greens, and yellows."

Vickers interrupted in a tone which jarred upon me.

"You are from the jungles and know all about everything. Why do these birds have a bald patch without feathers on the forehead?"

I might, to any one else, have suggested some Darwinian theory of their evolution from butting llamas, but to him I only replied "Ask me another." Somehow one felt chary of venturing a jesting remark to Vickers; his superior air seemed to freeze any attempt at jocularity.

We inspected cormorants trained to catch fish, and young pelican.

"Here are curiosities," I exclaimed, passing on to some large babies of brown and grey fluff.

"What darlings!" said the ladies in concert.

"You can hardly imagine," I said, "that they will grow up into giant white herons without a sign of any other colour on them."

So we passed on from bird to bird, I trying my best to keep the conversation general, explaining the mode of life of the fishermen and so on; while Vickers, in whom the habit of flattery was ingrained, was equally endeavouring to convey to Miss Waynfleete

at every point that it was her beauty and not the beauty of the birds that he was out to see. It was all very well done after a fashion, and the girl seemed to be enjoying her conquest.

The pair were drifting away and gazing across the lake, and I was feeling almost played out as showman.

To my relief the Maulwi at this juncture interfered with signal success. Till then he had confined himself to babbling out a string of naïve remarks, such as only a townsman could have evolved, praising the beauty of the birds, and, like a pious Mahommedan, incessantly glorifying the Creator from whom they derived their being.

"Miss Sahib," he now called out, pointing to a little heap of earthenware, "you must see these pots."

Vickers turned round with an ill grace at this banale interruption.

"What on earth is there to see in them?" he asked rudely.

The Maulwi is a courtier, and he smiled genially. "Sir, it is not so much the pots as their uses. They are for catching duck. See the eye-holes."

The boatmen were told to give a demonstration. The lad Miru put a pot on his head and swam out to the neighbourhood of a bunch of coots. As he neared them, he slowed down till there merely appeared the vessel floating gently on the face of the water.

The coots paddled aside slightly to avoid a collision. But they did not go far. Suddenly one disappeared below the surface, snatched down by the hand of the swimmer.

"How clever!" said Barbara; "but, poor thing, is it still alive?"

"Oh yes," I replied. "A Mahommedan is careful not to kill except in the neighbourhood of a knife. There he is, bringing it up to the surface. The boatmen will have that for themselves."

Our expedition over, Vickers walked off ahead with Barbara towards the camp, but Mrs Benson, good little soul, slowed me down. Like most women, she loved match-making, and having seen through my devices of the afternoon, thought that Vickers should at least have some small innings.

"Isn't it curious how girls like superficialities?" I remarked, *àpropos* of nothing.

"Well, yes," she admitted. "They think more of a man who is attentive in small ways."

"I am perfectly sure your Dick never wooed you simply with pretty speeches," I retorted.

She laughed happily. "No, dear clumsy old boy! But sometimes in early days I did wish he were less matter-of-fact. We women can't do without a certain amount of sentiment."

The "clumsy old boy" and Vernon came across the open to meet us, their dusty clothes showing they had just returned from the partridges.

"You were a mug not to go with us this afternoon," he said boisterously. "We got one hundred and twenty between us, mostly blacks."

Mrs Benson was all agog to know of her husband's prowess, but while we discussed the beat Vernon walked off to join Miss Barbara, who was waiting in front of the tents, and asked her about the bird farm. The girl gave him a glowing account, interrupted by

Vickers, who suggested he should have come himself if he wanted to see.

Any reply Vernon might have made to this was effectually cut short by Humpie, who at this moment broke away from the nurse who was taking him off to bed.

"I will say good-night," he shouted, rushing at his aunt. And then began a great chase, Miss Waynfleete and Vernon passing the little fellow backwards and forwards to each other, he hiding now behind one, now behind the other, while the nurse made great pretence of being unable to catch him.

It was all too much for Vickers, who disliked children intensely, and he walked off to his tent in disgust.

At dinner discussion arose over the weight of shot to use.

Filgate was all for number seven at all kinds of birds, and the rest of us fell on him.

"I can quite understand your making top score where partridges and quail exist as to-day, and sevens may do for snapping at hares which are bound to be near shots in jungle, but one must change to suit other birds," said Moore.

"Well, I don't," said the Political. "I fired sevens all day yesterday. You get a better pattern."

"I should like to watch you," said Miles. "I know you got as good a bag as most of us, but how many shots did you fire?"

"It is all a question of distance, to my mind," I interposed; "you can get birds with any shot if you wait for them. Last year I found myself in the midst of duck, coming easy, and fired every cartridge

I had with me, from ones to nines. They came down just the same with all of them, because the range was so easy."

"I must admit," said Filgate, "I did not fire as many as some people; but what is the good unless you are fairly certain?"

"That would hardly do for Hazratabad," remarked Vernon. "We have, as a rule, to shoot when we can, not when we would like to, and it is better to fire heavy shot when you think a bird will get up at a distance, than to wait for a chance which you may never get at closer quarters with lighter shot."

Vickers, I noticed, took no part in the discussion, but applied himself assiduously to amusing Barbara.

Vernon's glance wandered in their direction continually, and, once dinner was over, he endeavoured to get across to them. However, a knot of ardent sportsmen intercepted him, and he was held to a continued discussion on shooting topics generally, while, to his evident chagrin, he heard Vickers persuade the two ladies to stroll with him in the brilliant moonlight outside.

CHAPTER XII.

SHOOTING AND STRATEGY.

"THIS is rough luck," said Pollard at breakfast, indicating a telegram that he had received early in the morning. "I must be off. They have caught me for a big committee on our huge Canal projects."

"Ah, yes," said Cardew, with a professional air, "I hear your engineers are going to try and rival our great Punjab schemes. That will take some doing."

"Anyway, we intend to have a try. Well, I must bolt back if I am to have the facts of my district at my finger-ends; I might have been given more notice."

"Yes, it is hard. You could have digested your papers just as well here if you had brought them," remarked Benson. "Still, such things can't be helped when you are a Government servant."

"We shall be sorry to lose you," said Filgate, "but the cream of the shooting is over. The head boatman tells me that few birds have come back."

We all chimed in with commiserations and regrets at Pollard's departure. Then, leaving him chatting

with the ladies, we went off to draw for our seats for the last duck shoot. Moore had gone too, unfortunately, so we struck out his place at 9. Ten was near enough to keep the birds on the move. Vickers got my place, I drew 4, Vernon 1, and Benson 2. Rutherford got 10, but Mauleverer, by chance, drew his old place at 8, while Filgate drew 6. We left the Nawab to use his quick-firers at 12, and, with Cardew at 5, the list was complete. There were thus ten guns only instead of twelve.

I went over to my tent for a smoke and a final look to my cartridges, and a little later saw the four-mule barouche drive up to take away the luckless Pollard.

After seeing Nawab move off with all my necessary paraphernalia, I strolled outside to say good-bye to our friend from Sind.

I found Humpie had already clambered up beside the coachman and was pretending to drive, while his aunt made encouraging remarks from below. It was not long before Vernon joined the little group, much to Humpie's delight.

"I'll take you for a drive if you like, Mr Vernon, and Auntie Barbara too, but there isn't room for Mr Vickers," seeing that gentleman also approaching.

"Your sister's nurse hasn't much to do, I should imagine," remarked Vickers to Miss Barbara. "That child is everywhere except with her."

"Probably that is my fault," replied the girl. "Don't you like children, Mr Vickers? I simply love them, and especially this particular urchin."

Vickers was saved from replying, as every one now

turned out for the start to the boats, and after saying good-bye to Pollard we all moved off.

I was glad to get into my perch at No. 4 instead of the one I had had on the previous occasion. This time it was merely a question whether the birds would come within range, and not of snapping as the chance arose. The trees were low and at reasonable intervals. I made Nawab turn sideways to the sun, and told off a boat-boy to mark from the other side, while I myself faced the shade, but was ready to wheel round when notified.

"We shan't lose any to-day," said Nawab. "There is no land near, and I have made these boatmen understand."

Time was up, and the birds that rose with the first shots seemed for a time to be as numerous as ever, but it was only for a brief spell. The gun got hot once, and that was all. The mass of birds had profited by the first day's hammering, and, after a cast here and there, rose higher and higher and disappeared off the lake for good. Once or twice some flights returned when bombed off the waters close by, but the hot moments were rare, and shooting was confined to the obstinate individual birds who refused to leave their haunts.

One got to know some of the flights. Six red-crested pochards passed me; they were all females, for in certain seasons the sexes of some kinds keep scrupulously apart. I tried a long shot, but they passed on. The "boom, boom" of Marryat's old gun told that he had aimed at the same flight. It was not then, but a little later, that a splash denoted

a success to Vernon. Back they came down the water. Marryat made them four, and the rest swung too high over me to be worth a shot.

"Turn west," shouted a boat-boy, and I wheeled round in time to spot the black head of a shoveller and bring him down.

Just as they fly differently, so birds fall in a different manner. The short wings of a shoveller send the wounded bird down with a rapid slanting fall, quite different from that of others who manage to slow down their descent with larger outstretched wings.

The red-crested pochards were back to us, but only three of them: one had fallen out in the voyage round the lake. They passed me at a fairly safe distance, but I was annoyed with them and let fly.

"Filgate's sevens would have been no use this time," I thought, as a boatman waded off to collect my bird. "Fours just touched that one."

A solitary duck returned, and was never seen again. Birds are queer things, and if they decide to stay in a place, they will stay even if it means death to them. It was mainly birds of this kind that provided our amusement.

"*Ischnap*, Sahib," called Nawab, and I was just in time to fire at a high snipe which was seeking a new station of rest on the far side. It was near enough to come within the pattern of the heavier shot, and was collected as a rarity. Waters vary extremely, but it was certainly surprising to find so large a lake with no outlying grassy bits for snipe.

"Time for lunch," called out Mr Marryat, as his

men poled him along clumsily towards me. "Come on board my boat and let us get back."

It was still early, and I should have liked to see the time out, but it was not worth bothering about a few minutes.

"Come along. You Hazratabadis spoilt all my shooting. I like to have men near me who don't spot and send skywards every flight. You can have my place this afternoon. It is not worth while turning out; I only got eleven."

My own bag was but eighteen and the snipe, and when we got back it was to find that only three had beaten twenty—Cardew with twenty-three, Vernon with twenty-two, and Vickers with twenty-seven.

As I have said, so much depends on the draw in a big shoot like this, that there could be no real competition in the results. Still, we could not help being interested in the fact that both Vickers and Vernon stood at a hundred each. Benson had had bad luck the first day, but I was delighted to find myself leading Filgate and his sevens by six plus the snipe.

"Don't forget, old boy," I said with a chuckle, as we discussed the score, "that I got my snipe with No. 4's."

"Mr Travers, did you happen to keep any of the tail feathers of the mallards you have shot?" asked Miss Barbara. "My sister tells me that they are so nice for one's hat."

"I am sorry to say I never thought of it. How about you, Vernon?"

"I did think of it, but only this morning," replied Vernon, "and that was too late. Unless one gives the order at once they are all stolen and sold. A farthing a pair is the price, the Maulwi tells me."

"That doesn't seem much," remarked the girl. "Still, when as many are shot as were yesterday, I suppose it means something to poor people."

"I wonder you ladies have not thought of preserving some of the wings," said Mr Marryat; "my wife always does. They are so easy to cure. Just pin them out on boards and lay them on the ground in the sun. The sun and the ants between them do all that is necessary."

"Well, I thought of doing some like that for my wife," said Cardew ruefully. "All would have been well had we not left the wings on boards in an empty tent. The pariah dogs happened to be more than usually ravenous that night, and tore them into shreds in the hope of finding a particle of food."

"Well, we'll try and get you both wings and tail feathers to-day," said Vernon. "Wish us luck at our last shoot, Miss Waynfleete."

"Indeed I do. I hope you will all make splendid scores," she responded heartily. But as she did not happen to be looking at anybody in particular at the moment, her little speech fell flat as far as Vernon was concerned.

As we turned out after lunch I offered Vernon my reversion of the Commissioner's seat, but he refused.

"That would not be fair—thanks. I will stick to one."

He evidently had an idea that he was in competition, and must take no extra advantage.

When we reached the bank I found Maulwi Abdul Karim waiting. He asked to be allowed to join me in my boat, remarking that he would like to see my shooting.

"Certainly; I have no objection, but there are many good shots out to-day."

"That is so," replied the Judge, anxious to be polite to all, "but other Sahibs say 'Damn!' and 'Oh Hell!' when shots are diverted by the hand of God, and this is not good to hear."

I had to explain that prolonged residence with a grandmother after arriving at the age of swearing had trained me to the use of other monosyllables, and that I must not take too much credit to myself.

The Maulwi was a genial soul, and I welcomed his companionship; also, though I had not encouraged him to come for that purpose, I was glad to see an extraordinary change in the attitude of the boatmen.

We sportsmen were mere individuals, likely perhaps to tip smaller or larger sums which might be stolen by the minor officials of the State, but the Judge was a being of much majesty and power. Rowing improved. Poling was positively fast, and we got to our perch well before Vernon, though he had started level with us.

Old Buddhu murmured through his irregular teeth in a patois which only custom could have enabled the Maulwi to understand.

"True for you, Buddhu," he said; "I will tell the Sahib."

"What is the point?" I inquired, a little annoyed at finding yet another riverain dialect which was still to be mastered.

"Buddhu says that you should wait till the flights come in with the dusk, and not go home while it is still light."

I remembered the movements in the air as we had boated home the first day, and was ready to agree. Vernon passed me when I had assimilated the idea, and I repeated it to him.

"That is a good suggestion," he shouted back. "I have nothing to hurry back for."

I did not like the last expression, but anyway, would have given nothing for a woman who would have interfered on an occasion like this. Vernon boated on without further remark, and the shooting soon commenced.

The whole of the first hour was dull indeed, and we could count the shots fired all over the lake.

The Maulwi and I rested on tall stools made of reeds, and waited for calls from the men on each flank. I found my friend the Judge a bit of a trial at first. When we were both standing up I was all right, because I knew where he was, but when, after being seated for a time, I straightened myself to tackle a couple of fast-whizzing teal, the Maulwi leapt from his seat with Oriental politeness and disconcerted me altogether.

"You must be kind enough to remain seated," I said, I hope in not too testy a manner.

"Sir, I cannot sit if your Honour stands. Would you blacken my face?"

"In sport, Judge Sahib, politeness gives way to policy, and I cannot shoot if you are dancing about."

It took some time to make the courteous gentleman understand, and though he acquiesced at last, it was with obvious reluctance. A little later, after I had essayed a high shot at an overhead mallard, I looked down and found that he was indeed in a sitting posture, but that his body was not actually touching the chair.

"Let us stand and talk," he ventured apologetically: "Your Honour is a hard man and will not tire. I like not to feel ashamed."

We stood watching the few flights that scudded amongst the trees or kept high in the blue sky above.

"Great is God, the Creator. Allah fashions marvellous things," he cried when Miru brought in a spot-billed duck that fell close to our stand. "His fate was accomplished."

"See how God feeds all His creatures!" was his comment as an osprey fell with its rushing stoop out of the vault above on to a white-eye that Benson had touched.

Had I been a theologian of another school I might have argued that both the preserver and the destroyer were at work then. As it was, I caught the osprey in the head as it rose with its prize. The white-eye disentangled itself from the relaxing talons, and fluttered into safety in the water below the trees.

"God made you the rescuer of the innocent," asseverated the Judge.

That sounded good addressed to one who would have slain the white-eye too, but Abdul Karim saw nothing incongruous in his remark.

A long period of stagnation followed, and presently Benson passed our stand on his way home.

"What ho!" I cried across the water to him.

"No ho! at all. I have only got five. The first day was the only one worth coming for."

"I have only five down too, but I shall wait a bit longer." Benson's men poled him away through the bushes, but he had started a train of thought in my mind.

"What did you think of the heron farm yesterday, Maulwi Sahib? Had you been there before?"

The Maulwi had not, and expressed surprise at the egret breeding.

"Their plumes go to England to decorate our women-folk," I informed him gravely. "What says Saadi on the subject? 'A man's manliness is his adornment, but a woman needs paint, powder, and perfume.'"

"Do I understand, sir," asked my friend, "that with you women are free in the choice of their husbands?"

"Well, not quite," I replied. "They don't make the first move in the game, or what is called the proposal. That is left to the man, but they are free to take or refuse what is offered them."

"Have the parents no choice and no power?" inquired the Maulwi, a little puzzled. "With us, our betrothals are arranged in early childhood."

"No; they may attempt to guide, to introduce the

right stamp of man, and to persuade, but, other things being equal, they hardly interfere."

"We would not trust our women to choose aright, but no doubt your ladies are wise, like your men."

I broke off at a call from Sharu, and took a neat right and left from a wisp of wigeon.

When the rest had passed, the Maulwi remarked, "Mr Vickers is quick, no doubt, but Mr Vernon is steady, I think."

I had not time to consider whether the Oriental, who seemed a strange compound of childish simplicity and surprising acuteness, meant me to take his remark as part of the previous conversation, for at that moment crack! crack! went Vernon's two barrels from his place at No. 1. I swung round in anticipation of a large flight of teal, evidently bound for a haven close to me, and got in a barrel aimed short of the leader, and another raking them as they passed.

The Maulwi was full of admiration. "No doubt, sir," he said, "you have a great adroitness in this sport. It is wonderful, wonderful."

I was rather pleased myself. Four — no, five — dropped stone dead; a sixth slanted down, and, ricochetting twice off the surface of the water, slipped helplessly into a forked branch that dipped into the lake. But Nawab kept his eye on the flight.

"There drops another. Go at once, Miru, you lazy ruffian."

"Seven at a blow" made me feel as bold as the tailor, and as the evening closed in many more flights drifted down to their accustomed night's lodg-

ing-place. They came in from the end of No. 1, as a rule, so that I usually heard the warning sounds of Vernon's gun. Most of the flights, having risen to his shot, were high as they passed me, but an untouched batch of pintails gave me another good chance. Four of the flight and two single birds were enough to prove that pintails could be got if one waited long enough.

The Maulwi was full of his plaudits, and called on Allah to witness that in creating a shot like me he had matched all the other marvels of creation. Somewhat diffident at such praise for a very ordinary performance, I coo-eed to Vernon, as the dusk had deepened and deepened into dark.

"Twenty-two," he said, as he joined me.

I showed my twenty-six. "Eleven in two lots," I said. "Did you get any real *coups?*"

"No; all were individual birds. I was awfully fed up by the time Benson left, and should have followed his example but for your hint."

We got in just in time to change, but, as we expected, Hazratabad had won the day and Vernon had beaten Vickers, partly, of course, because the latter had thought more of philandering than of staying late. None of the others had got more than a baker's dozen.

As I was dressing, a servant in gorgeous livery called at my tent with a magnificent basket of roses, and I read the legend "Miss Waynfleete" on a visiting-card of Vickers'.

"The ingenious ruffian is evidently not to be outdone," I said to myself, "and is calling the resources

of the State gardens to his aid. Miles will have to look up." And I directed the man to the right tent.

And, sure enough, I noticed the young lady wearing at dinner, with equal credit to the flowers and to herself, some of Vickers' offering.

I did not at all like the pace at which Vickers was going. Here was a real nice girl, the sort of girl who deserves the best that can be got, and it looked as if she might be swept off her balance by the outward graces of a superficial young idiot like Vickers. Mentally, I compared the "Superiority" with Miles, with whose sterling qualities and real goodness of heart I was becoming daily more impressed. I do not make friends easily, but Miles had "got hold" of me as few people had done before.

Whether Miss Waynfleete cared in earnest for Vickers, I with my dull male intelligence was really unable to say, but I suddenly made up my mind that he should not have her if I could help it.

I remembered that Sialgarh was so close to the Doratta State, that Vickers would have the opportunity of running up for week-ends and holidays, and it was certain that he was just the sort of person to create invitations for himself. There seemed no chance of another meeting between the Bensons and ourselves till the great horse show at Hajikot across the river, at the end of March, and much might happen in six weeks with one so aggressive as Vickers.

However, the cheerful buzz of conversation round the table put an end to my train of thought for the time being.

Our last gathering was a genial one, just tinged with that touch of regret that a pleasant party naturally feels on the eve of its breaking up.

As our Hazratabad train had to leave very early the next morning, the young Chief came into the dining-tent after dinner to say "good-bye." Though a Mahommedan, he was sufficiently bound by Hinduised local custom not to join us at meals.

"Good-bye, Mr Travers," he said to me, frankly. "I am glad you have enjoyed yourselves, and I hope you will invite me to Hazratabad to shoot ravine deer. We have none in this State." I assured him that we would welcome him, and our farewells were over.

When he had departed, I had to slip back into my tent for my cigarette-holder, and found Nawab cleaning guns, and packing away with Mamdu everything connected with the shoot. He had a parcel of duck for our consumption, and some for the Eurasian station-master, and for a Christian clerk, now transformed into Albert Williams from his ancient patronymic of Ahmed Khan. These formed the sum total of the population of Hazratabad who could eat duck which had died without a knife at their throats.

Nawab was vainglorious, as all servants are, at the prowess of his master.

"Khwajah Khizr, God of the Indus, was on our side, and kept up the glory of our name. The birds saw us as Sheikh Raju's envoys, and fell down."

I was not interested in the allusion to the shrine whither we had to return, but the mention of the

Indus suggested a solution to the problem that had been bothering me.

Hurrying back, I edged my way towards the Bensons, who, as good luck would have it, were near each other.

"Dick, old boy," I called out, "when shall we do that river trips of ours? We have always been intending to make it together over that bit of our districts that join."

Benson responded heartily. "I am on. I shall have got work back into hand again a fortnight or so from now. Shall we settle the 25th?"

"You, of course, have been down the river, Mrs Benson," I said, turning to her, "and I am sure it will appeal to Miss Waynfleete."

"Oh yes, Barbara will love it. She finds pleasure in most things, and will thoroughly enjoy a 'river trip.'"

Having thus settled this matter to my satisfaction, we said good-night and good-bye.

Next morning we found the Maulwi ready to accompany us to the railway station.

"No, no, Maulwi Sahib. Please say good-bye to us here. There is really no need for you to go farther."

"No, my heart drags me to your company," was the reply of the genial gentleman. "I shall be back here to make arrangements for the departure of the others. May the merciful God bring you back once," was his last remark as our train steamed out.

CHAPTER XIII.

A PUNJAB FAIR.

NEXT morning Vernon and I left our luxurious camp, obliged again to set our noses to the grindstone of the Administration.

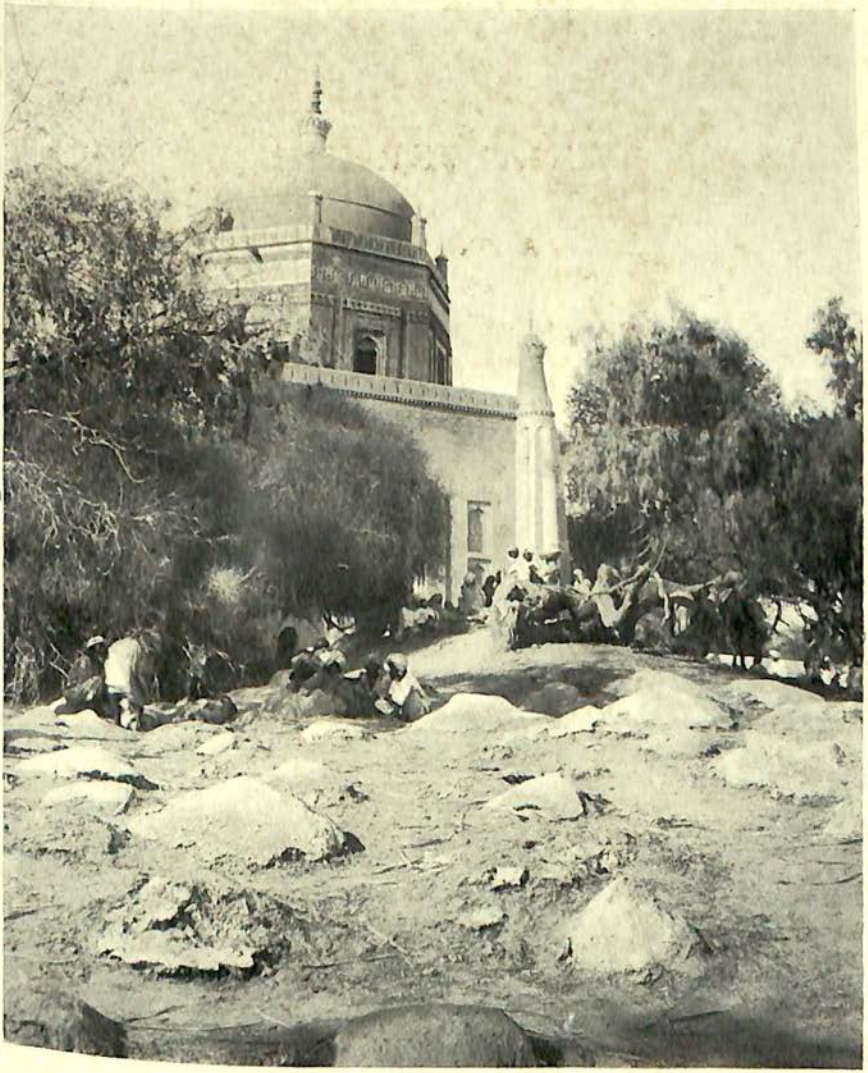
"You must have an appalling crush of case work," I said. "That is the worst of being an assistant. You can't dispose of work at odd moments. Mind you get clear before the river tour."

"I shall be hard at it for a fortnight," said Miles, with a gleam of gratitude for my reference to the river tour, "and then I shall be all right. How do you stand?"

"Oh, you might think that I have been on a shooting holiday; but what with the nights and mornings, and a few minutes here and there, I am not so badly in arrears."

We returned to the railway station of Sheikh Raju. The blue-tiled dome of the shrine showed high above the few straggling tamarisks which, tended with care by the custodians, relieved the monotony of the desert and its sand-hills.

The City Fathers were all at the station to meet us, and we drove, in a little two-wheeled car drawn



The shrine of Sheikh Raju.

by the yellow horse of a local official, the mile to the rest-house round which our tents had been pitched.

High overhead, between the double row of tamarisks that lined the dust-laden road, there darted stray flocks of parrots, green arrows launched against the blue.

"Don't forget," I said to Vernon, as we drove along, "that you have to inspect the accounts of the shrine. The Tahsildar will have them ready for you."

"What have we and a Hindu Tahsildar to do with a Mahommedan shrine?" asked my assistant.

"Well, you see it is the old question over which saints as well as kings have always had trouble—viz., primogeniture as against division among sons. The Mogul monarchs were always chopping their kingdoms in the vain attempt of pleasing all their sons, but it generally ended in the sons chopping each other to pieces."

"But how does that affect saints?" asked Miles. "A saint is a saint."

"Yes," I said, "but his saintship is transferable, like everything else in which there is money, and then arises the problem, 'Does sanctity descend to the eldest son, or is it divisible among all the sons?' The eldest son favours the former view and the others the latter."

"Well, what is the rule here?"

"That is where you and Lala Narinjan Das come in," I replied. "Here there is no primogeniture, and younger sons have grown and multiplied with

equal rights, until some two thousand shareholders in the virtue of this shrine are in existence. They used to quarrel so hard over the division of the profits on their religious capital that there was nothing for it but for the State—that is, you and Narinjan Das—to step in and manage it for them."

"What do we do with the profits?" asked Vernon.

"There is not enough to subdivide by two thousand, so every other year or so we put a new set of tiles on to a side of the shrine, or ornament the dome, or introduce latticed windows. You can worry out with the City Fathers, who are mainly directors in this company of saints, what you should do next."

We drove up to our tents, and after a spell in which all those who had been riding with us paid a formal call, we disappeared on to our respective work.

We met at lunch time.

"How goes it?" said I. "Don't forget the Fair."

"I don't,—I wish I could," replied Vernon. "I had twenty days' work to do in these ten, and must now do it in six to leave the Fair days partially clear."

The next six days were absorbed in unremitting toil. To the work at the desk was added the necessity of receiving every notable of any kind who came to the shrine. Every day they poured in in advance of the actual dates of the Fair.

Furious drumming denoted the arrival of the Hinjra contingent, with the squireens Allu, Ghulamu, and Mamdu riding proudly at their head with horses bedecked with silver trappings.

The drummer and the flautist with the double

flute, who marched in front, continued to make hideous din, while Allu made his horse go through one or two dancing movements, preparatory to a display of *la haute école*, which he insisted on giving at the Fair.

They paid their respects to us, and passed off again without giving any respite from the drums. Fainter grew the sounds as the procession passed down the town on its way to the camping-ground on the other side.

But before the din died away a fresh volume of sound arose, as Sharu Khan, Lishari, rode in with sons, brothers, nephews, cousins, and dependants. He was on the magnificent bay mare that had won the first prize at the Sialgarh horse show, and they on all kinds of beasts—three on a camel, two on a pony, anyhow, as long as they got there.

Sharu Khan dismounted, and, leaving his rag-tag outside, came in to my tent.

"That is a fine mare," I said. "Where did you get it?"

"I bred it at home, and it has been the apple of my eye. The father was an English thoroughbred at a Government stand."

He did not mention the breed of the mother, but I heard afterwards that it had been stolen from an officer in a far-off cantonment, and had reached him by a succession of changes. He had had the inconvenience of having to look for a neighbour's trotting camel to give in exchange.

The jest in this to Bahadur Khan, who told me

the story in his own reckless manner, lay in the fact that the man who brought the mare was bagged with the stolen camel, so got nothing for his pains but a term of imprisonment.

However, Sharu Khan had done nothing wrong in my time, at least not to my knowledge after my warning, so I only discussed his team of athletes with him and bade him God-speed.

Bahadur Khan and Sher Mahommed came by train, and I found them one morning sitting outside the tent soon after I was dressed. Mallik Massu was with them, and I could hear the bucolic roars of laughter which marked the sallies of rustic wit with which Bahadur Khan and Mallik Massu always corruscated when they met.

They came in to see me together, at which I sighed. It might save time for the moment, but I knew that it meant that they would all come again separately at another time.

Sher Mahommed would hardly allow the others to fire off the usual string of prayers for my health and for my children.

"I have brought a magnificent pair of *Doda* runners — two Pathans that will run down any men in all these districts," he shouted to me with the wild excitement of the enthusiast.

"Excellent!" I said; "have you seen them, Bahadur Khan?"

"Yes," he replied; "they are fine young fellows."

"I shall back the Butcher against them," said Mallik Massu. "Alone—not with his pair."

The talk ran on mostly in connection with this

exciting game, which formed the principal feature of the Fair, and which will be described later on.

I had heard that Ghulam Haider had sent up a pair from Sialgarh; and Nawab, listening eagerly outside the tent, called out that the Hinjras had a cobbler and a fisherman who would beat most couples.

The necessity of rebuking the interruption gave me the opportunity of bidding farewell to my friends.

Of all the rural notables only Mian Jamal did not turn up. His particular sect inculcated belief in minor saints like himself, when alive, but denied the efficacy of the shrines of the dead. In fact, he was inclined, when we met later, to suggest that I should not have countenanced the shrine by my presence.

The day passed, and, wearied by work and din, I called to Vernon, as the sun was setting, to come out for a walk.

We took the road that led into the desert away from the shrine. All along the road, wherever the great tamarisks, planted by officers whose names are but a memory, gave them shade we found family parties encamped, their camels gurgling in the background. The litters taken off the camels' backs were arranged to aid in giving shade, and the evening meals were in course of preparation. Our peasant folk are little imbued with ideas of concealment of women, and many comely young faces were to be seen.

Parties were still coming in. A man leading a camel by the nose-string trudged cheerily along,

singing the old Punjabi love-song of Sassi and Punnu. Old crones, women, and young children were squatting on the well-padded camel litters. Men came on horseback, occasionally with a woman riding pillion behind.

"It is hard on some of the women," said Vernon. "Look at that one with the child on her hip and the other with the bundle on her back."

I turned. "Do you see what is in the bundle?" I asked.

"Spare clothes and food, I should think," he replied.

"Not a bit—that is her own baby. How would you like to go the fifteen miles she has probably done with a band round your forehead holding that bundle, even if part of the weight were supported on the bent back?"

"What are these?" he said, his attention attracted to a large band of men who were tramping in together. They were headed by a stout middle-aged man, obviously not of the squireen class, and I was a little puzzled as they all salaamed.

"I know," I cried in a flash of comprehension; "it is the Butcher."

The Butcher and his satellites smiled pleasantly at the recognition.

"I hope you are in trim," I said to the athlete.

"He is, by your Honour's good fortune," replied the satellites, and the great man continued to smile. It is a mark of greatness in Hazratabad to make others speak for one.

"Who is the Butcher?" asked Vernon, as we walked along.

Women and babies going on pilgrimage.

"Oh," I said, "he is what Jeffries is to the inhabitants of the United States. He is the champion *Doda* player of these parts. All those with him are pupils and companions, men who are proud to be allowed to massage his arms or tread on his calves to knead them."

"He must be getting a bit old," said Miles, who, an athlete himself, had sized up the man very carefully.

"Ah, that is just it. Mallik Massu has a bet with Sher Mahommed that he will get through alone. Sher Mahommed wanted him to make the bet complete, so as to match a pair of Pathans to beat the Butcher's pair, both runners and catchers, but old Fatty was not to be drawn."

We turned back to get on with our work.

"Never mind," I said to Vernon, who seemed rather used up with the day and night's incessant work in the din and turmoil of the Fair. "We have the river trip to look forward to. I hope you are arranging your work cunningly for that."

"I am going to work off everything possible before then," said Miles, "and shall keep other work till it is over, with the exception of a few decisions and miscellaneous papers."

"So shall I," I said; "but, if Mian Jamal tells me of a great bustard, I shall have to go after it. He sent me news that a pair had been seen. Shall I send for you if we are apart when they are located?"

"No," replied Vernon, in a tone of decision. "I am not going to overload the river trip with work even for a great bustard."

The nights grew noisier and noisier. Parties of worshippers continued to arrive at all hours, usually breaking into music as they approached, or bursting forth with a song commemorating some miracle performed by the patron saint of the shrine. Those already arrived had sing-songs round the camp-fire, which in some cases would have sounded melodious if there had been less of them; while the continuous throb, throb of the small drums bore witness to the fact that devils were being cast out in the name of Apollos.

It was therefore a jaded pair of men who welcomed Rutherford on his arrival from headquarters to superintend the police arrangements of so large a crowd.

"Lucky dog!" I said. "You have only the Fair days to bear. We were mugs to have come here in advance."

Two be-spectacled, bent-backed men arrived to escort us to visit the school sports. One was the District Inspector, and the other the Assistant District Inspector of the schools of the district. A squat, corpulent teacher waddled behind them. He was the headmaster of the local school.

"The boys are ready for the sports," said Spectacles No. 1.

"By your Honour's noble patronage they are very fond of sport; exercise is very good for the youth," said Spectacles No. 2. The tubby master equally applauded the virtues of athletics, and, as I did not mention that men like them were the cause of my attempts to encourage others to develop their bodies, all went well. The first-fruits of Western

education have not been in all cases a perfect success.

"This, sir, is Lala Bodh Raj, assistant teacher," said the Headmaster, indicating a nervous young Hindu with a vacant smile. "He has done much to promote the sports. He is a good man. I always find that he does his best to please his pupils."

"Great Scot!" ejaculated Miles *sotto voce*, "that's a curious character to give an assistant master."

Youth is prepared to enjoy all kinds of games, and the Hazratabad boys are no exception to this rule. Races and wrestling, football and cricket, were all taken with zest. We were in duty bound to watch a fair proportion of the contests.

"That would not do at the Eton and Harrow match," said Rutherford, as a crowd of fat sympathisers of the local team pressed on to the ground with small coins and handkerchiefs, which they presented to a successful bowler. "Jones Minor may get tips, but not during the course of the game."

The rural populace, however, cared little for the boys' amusements, and only a few parents and relations formed the audiences. The mass of the people reserved themselves for the superior contests.

Tent-pegging produced innumerable competitors, who galloped recklessly down a high road of fairly firm clay, while the spectators viewed the scene from the two rows of great tamarisks. Owing to the number of horsemen anxious to compete, two pegs were put down. This almost led to several deaths, because many of the wilder and younger men on

untrained nags would swerve from the course of their peg and dash at the other, on which another rider was also converging.

Ghulamu, Hinjra, was there on a snorting red roan. Sharu Khan was represented by his nephew, Ali Baksh, who turned out to be the ultimate winner.

Sharu Khan and Ali Baksh had got into the stage, well known in our rural society, where the uncle is now accounted a pattern of all the virtues, subscribes to Royal Memorials, or aids in building schools, while his nephew bears the bad reputation which both ought to have.

"Hullo!" said Rutherford, "here comes one of my bloods," as a police sub-inspector, looking very smart, cantered down at a ridiculously slow pace.

"Faster, Ahmed Khan!" I cried; but Ahmed Khan took his peg at his leisure, and paraded proudly past the spectators.

"How is he doing?" I said, turning to my assistant.

"Well, he ran me a false coining case, which I had to let off," said Vernon. "I could not convict after seeing the place. I believe myself that he let off the guilty man, and concocted the case against another. Anyway, it was not real as it stood."

"It is not impossible. I hope you told him what you thought."

"I did, and he has sent me up two smart cases since," replied Vernon. "I took your tip of telling a man his reputation and suggesting that he must falsify it."

"Won't you show us your prowess, Sher Ma-

hommed?" I asked. Sher Mahommed smiled all over. He appeared, indeed, to have seated himself near us in the hope of this invitation.

"I am past such efforts now, and leave the game to younger men," he deprecated.

"Ah!" I blarneyed. "The younger men are doing badly, and want tuition."

Sher Mahommed arose and made great preparation. He divested himself of the fur cloak he was wearing, bound a tape over his turban and under his chin, and went off to the starting-post. He weighed his spear and shook it this way and that. At last, satisfied that all was ready, he made his horse plunge into the air by a tug at the cruel bit, and dashed down the course at full speed.

"Allah! Allah!" he shouted while still at a distance, but, as he bent low to the peg and took it faultlessly, it was "Ali! Ali!" that he screamed forth.

The reason of the change of cry was typical of our peoples. Allah is the God of all, but Ali, the nephew of the prophet, was a great athlete and the patron saint of all sportsmen, and our people believe that the lesser functionary has the greater power in his own particular line.

I rose and congratulated Sher Mahommed, at the same time giving the signal to break up the meeting. Sher Mahommed was delighted, as I had intended that he should be, at the fact that he had not to run again, and could rest on his laurels.

We all mounted and started towards the town and our tents. Sher Mahommed's musicians were out at once with drum and fife, and the Lishari

bandsmen were equally ready to parade in front of their successful champion. We thus proceeded, amidst much dust, the three white men in front, the leading squires jostling each other for precedence, and all the retainers and squireens pressing forward on to each other.

We thus got home in triumph with a pomp and parade that pleased the populace immensely.

Lala Narinjan Das Tahsildar had avoided the mounted sports, and was squatting, cross-legged, on a string-bed awaiting us. He rose with a bow, and claimed our attention.

"The leading gentlemen have invited a celebrated singer from Pind Mulraj to-night. Will your Honours grace the performance?"

"Oh Lord!" ejaculated Rutherford. "These lady professors of singing and dancing are too much for me."

"I should like to see a show once," put in Vernon, to whom all these things were more or less fresh.

My sympathies were entirely with Rutherford, but, partly to please Vernon and partly to please the gentry, I agreed to turn out soon after dinner.

Lala Narinjan Das bowed profoundly. I found out later that he had a reputation for a fine taste where the fair sex was concerned.

We had our dinner, and sat out for a time afterwards in the verandah, admiring the stars in the clear sky.

"I suppose the Tahsildar will fetch us," said Vernon, with a glance at his watch.

"Oh, of course," I said; "he is certain to come. Let us sit in peace till he does."

Ten o'clock came, and I said wearily, "This is a bore. Let us see what they are up to, and return if nothing is on."

We went to the spot selected on the cricket-ground about two hundred yards away. Not a soul was there, and we turned back.

"I am off to bed," I said. "I am dead to the world with sleep."

The others agreed, and in a very short time we were all snoring hard.

In my dreams I was in a channel steamer approaching the Cliffs of Dover. A fog came on, and a siren seemed to scream incessantly. I was just in the stage of wondering whether my long-wished-for leave would ever result in a sight of England when a peculiarly shrill scream of the siren woke me altogether.

My dream was ended, but the screams continued. I tried to shut out the din with my bed-clothes and sleep again, but it was hopeless; so, rigging on some kind of clothing, and putting on a heavy coat, I went out.

I found Vernon and Rutherford already on the cricket-ground, amidst a crowd of white-clad gentry.

"What has happened?"

"The lady singer, whom I have christened the Barrel on account of her figure, refused to sing before midnight," explained Rutherford.

"Oh, I suppose she wanted to sing to after-midnight music."

I had heard that there are special tunes for each of the eight watches which cannot be sung at others, but never had it been brought home to me so emphatically before.

"This could only happen in a country of unlimited time," Rutherford murmured with a sleepy yawn. "Fancy Melba keeping the audience waiting till the clock struck twelve, or Harry Lauder insisting on the Music Hall opening before lunch."

The Barrel, meanwhile, continued to scream her utmost. She was a fat roundabout of at least forty, and was obviously a favourite. It was only our bad taste that we did not approve of her. She gyrated with the grace and poetry of motion of an elephant, jingling her anklet-bells and gesticulating gently with her fingers.

An occasional respite was obtained when a young pupil took a turn. There was the same pirouetting, the same anklet-bells, the same finger exercises; but the voice was less harsh, and as the local proverb says, "even the young donkey is pleasant to look at." Relief, however, was but small, and the screams of the Barrel kept briskly on. Vernon and I were jaded already, and sat on, wearied beyond endurance. It was impossible to sleep up against an engine whistle or we would have dropped off.

Finally, I took the bull by the horns, and with the best manners that I could bring to my aid, I explained to Lala Narinjan Das that we were tired, and hoped that the rest of the séance would take place on the other side of the shrine. Most of the audience took it pleasantly enough, but Bahadur Khan and Mallik

Massu grumbled as stout men reluctant to move. Ignoring the grumbling, we regained our tents and got off to sleep as quickly as possible.

Next morning was devoted to wrestling. The majority of the combatants were low-caste men, but most were attached to one or other of the numerous patrons. Hence rivalry and betting continued warm. Sher Mahommed had a musician, Ramzu, as his champion, but Sharu Khan produced a barber, Faizu, to pit against him.

This match resolved itself into a contest between the north and south of the district, and all the previous combats were tinged thereby with this rivalry.

The pairs were numerous, and had been matched by a committee of hard-headed sportsmen only after an immense amount of wrangling. Our wrestlers are as bad as boxers in England, and make an immense amount of fuss as to whom they will agree to meet. When our trio arrived on the ground where the fair songstress had so murdered our midnight peace, we found a large crowd assembled. The Barber's trainer advanced, and touched our feet in turn, and then went with his champion and some younger pupils to the edge of the wrestling-ground. Each breathed a silent prayer, then three times touched the loose sand and lifted some to their brows.

This worship of the wrestling-ground over, they leapt up and down in the open, slapping their thighs with resounding smacks.

The other champion and his satellites did the same, but the miscellaneous competitors only performed this ritual just before their bout. All wore a single

garment, consisting of a very tight pair of bathing-drawers, while the long-haired men from the villages that affected the Baloch ringlets had tight-fitting caps that covered their ears like those worn by Rugby footballers.

Vernon, Rutherford, and I constituted ourselves umpires, and ran the bouts off three at a time. The early competitors set to with energy and excitement, and the falls were soon decided.

After a time the competitors became fewer but more expert, and contests took, in some cases, an unconscionably long time to decide. A young Hinjra resisted all the efforts of a more experienced but older wrestler from Massu's grazing village. Time after time Massu's champion tried lock after lock, fall after fall, but all in vain. The Hinjra slipped and eluded, but for the most part remained on the defensive.

"Go for him, you son of sin," roared a burly fellow who looked like a prize-fighter himself.

The taunt seemed to put the necessary spirit into the younger man, and by one lightning effort he had the worn-out grazier on his back, beaten.

"It was my language that did it," shouted the stout spectator delightedly, adding as an after-thought the challenge, "and would any one have dared say it but myself to my own nephew?"

Yells of triumph rose from the Hinjra trio, and Mallik Massu's fat face fell considerably.

"Now for the champions," said Vernon. "There are no other pairs left."

"I am not sorry to hear that," Rutherford replied.

"The Police Inspector wants his orders for the *Doda* to-morrow. It will take some policing. I have estimated for twelve thousand spectators."

"I should allow for fifteen thousand. There were four thousand tickets collected last night by one train only. Knock off women and children, but count the other train-loads, and the arrivals by road for several days, and you won't find it far short."

Ramzu and Faizu went through an immense amount of preliminaries. They worshipped the wrestling-ground again, shook hands with each other, did a press up or two to improve their arm muscles, and a squat or two to relax their legs, slapped the inner part of both thighs and smacked their biceps, then faced each other in a crouching position, left hand on thigh and right outstretched ready to grip. After looking into each other's eyes for a prolonged period, they got up, walked round the ring, and faced again, but with right hand on thigh and left hand out.

"Buck up, you blighters," said Rutherford, in the coarse language of the material, minute-saving West.

They did not understand the language, but the sounds acted as an incentive, and they snatched at each other's hands to get the first grip. This failed, and they disengaged. Ramzu then feinted by offering the Barber an elusive grip of his left hand, and threw his right across the latter's neck. A pull forward, and he had his opponent's waist-band, and at last the couple seemed properly at grips.

"Now they are busy," cried Rutherford. "No, they are not! Confound it," he corrected, as a twist

and wrench ended in the parties facing each other as at the beginning.

Ramzu was trying for a new hold, when suddenly Faizu gripped his extended arm with an upper and lower clinch, and with a sharp jerk brought him face downwards on the ground in one motion.

"You look out for that catch at the *Doda* to-morrow," I remarked to Vernon. "It is a regular trick with the runners."

Faizu was on the top of his man in a trice, but he had had to back a lot to bring it off, and the second's delay gave the musician a chance. The hold he got appeared sound to us who were inexperienced, but when Faizu, placing one arm across Ramzu's neck, proceeded to lift him over with the other, we were surprised to find that, with the aid of a wriggle here and a contortion there, the Musician was not only not down but very much on the top of the Barber.

North and south yelled with varying emotions.

Thus the battle raged.

"Well," said Vernon, "it is an evenly matched pair, but I wish they would be more energetic over it."

"Perhaps you would not be energetic if you had to compete yourself. The fact is that the efforts of one are promptly neutralised by the other."

The end came at last, as so often is the case, with great rapidity. Faizu had managed to grip the Musician and lift him up in the air. He threw him down once, but only on one shoulder, picked him up before he could recover himself, and threw

him again with violence on the ground. Again Ramzu just evaded the fall. Faizu seized him once more for a last cast, when all of a sudden his legs were gathered under him, and Ramzu stood over him triumphant.

"That is smart," I said; but I had to hurriedly congratulate Sher Mahommed, condole with Sharu Khan, and break up the assembly as quickly as possible.

"Bustle them about," I said. "We don't want partisan quarrels."

We hurried off as soon as we could, and I for one snatched half an hour's snooze before lunch. A glance at the boys' football in the evening sufficed, but otherwise the afternoon was devoted to work. Dining together as usual, we heard a distant drum.

"Now I think we ought to go and see the casting out of devils this evening," I suggested.

"Right you are," replied both my companions.

We did not want to pick up a trail of followers, so strolled off to the far end of our encampment, and took a little path that led to the back of the shrine. Small parties were dotted about here and there, but we went by sound towards a group illuminated by a little oil-lamp, and stood a short distance off.

Two musicians sat, one with a small drum and the other with a low-sounding pipe that merely gave an under-current of a refrain. It was the drummer whose exertions and music were to cast out the devil. The patient, a young woman, sat

with a shift and skirt on only. Her hair hung loose, and the plaits and the cloth appendage, always added to lengthen the plaits, had been untied. Rocking her body gently to the slow music, she threw her head downwards, the black hair falling in a cascade in front. Back she jerked again, almost touching the ground behind with her head, her comely soft face emerging from her hair.

"The full moon coming out of a dark sky," quoted Vernon irreverently from an Indian poet.

The music grew faster and faster, and the girl tossed her head backwards and forwards as best she could to the pace of the music. This she kept up for a prodigious time, though her face showed, during the backward movements, how trying it was. At last, when the pace was fastest, her powers failed, and she toppled over almost unconscious.

The musicians ran round, bowing to all her relations, congratulating them on the departure of the evil spirit, and took up the collection that the Church always considers its due. A few drops of water were sprinkled on the patient to revive her, and she went off staggering in the arms of her relations.

"You have a try, Rutherford. I bet the devil would go out of you at the end of a hundred swings," chaffed Vernon.

We went round a number of other groups, seeing women in various stages of fanaticism or exhaustion. As we were leaving we found Nawab, the orderly, pursuing us with a lantern.

"Many of the women only pretend they have evil spirits in them for fear their husbands will not take

them to the shrine," he vouchsafed. "Will you come and see a *man* with a devil?"

We agreed, and went openly to the inner circle of another large group. Nawab placed his lantern to light up the face of the penitent. He was a young man of powerful physique, with thick hair nearly as long on his shoulders as a woman's. His exertions were proportionately powerful, and though the drummer drummed his hardest, his endurance was greater than ours, and we left while he was still rocking as hard as ever.

"An obstinate devil possésses a strong man," said Rutherford. "Vernon would be a refractory patient, I fancy."

"To-morrow is the last day," he went on. "Can't say I am sorry, although it is interesting. These noises are wearing. Besides, I must bolt to the top end of the district. There has been a fine riot over two small boys wrestling. Four men are in hospital, and a couple are not expected to recover."

"What children these Pathans are," I said. "I hope you can get there before they have messed the evidence about too much. I suppose it will be a case for me to try."

CHAPTER XIV.

DODA—THE GAME OF THE WESTERN PUNJAB.

THE morning of the great day of the Fair, the day of the *Doda* competitions, opened with the most fiendish drummings that made all sleep hopeless after six A.M.

Each of the champions of the day had to visit the shrine with their patrons and admirers to ask for blessings, and, after the manner of the priesthood all the world over, the attendants sent each off to the fray with an equal blessing.

"There is no hurry for us," I said to the others after breakfast. "The preliminaries on these occasions are interminable. Let us go to the shrine and look round it. Rutherford and I have not been near it yet."

The others agreed, and we rode to the gateway of the celebrated tomb. On the outskirts of the town the lanes were lined with booths that stand empty in the off season. Now all of them were thronged with busy life. Overhead, in the main bazaar, the roofs nearly met, and the narrow paved alley was crowded with merry pilgrims, gaily dressed, who

jostled for precedence with donkeys and bullocks, while the pariah dogs sought a precarious living from the garbage in the gutters. The pilgrims and their women were shopping with the fierce joy of country folk let loose in the town, and a roaring trade was being done in all that the native soul delights in.

We were received with affability, and velvet mocassins were provided to put over our boots that we might not contaminate the holy ground with leather.

The crowd was thick at the entrance. Suddenly I stopped and said—

"Who is that Awan, Rutherford? He must be an Awan by his face, and I think I have met him before."

Rutherford could not identify the man, but a native in the crowd said, "You are quite right, Sahib. That is Ali Mahommed who got seven years for being connected with the murder of Yaran Khan at Dang Kot. He has come to the shrine to register a vow on release."

"By Jove, yes," I said, my memory travelling back to the early days of my magisterial life; "that was an intricate case. I thought when I committed him to the sessions that he would certainly have been convicted as a principal. Well, Ali Mohammed, is all at peace now?"

But the man had no wish to be recognised by authority, and, salaaming, sidled away.

I guessed at the time, and had reason to know afterwards, that his object was not so much to

thank the shrine for getting him off with so slight a sentence as to pray and vow presents for vengeance on those who got him jailed.

We went to the entrance to the shrine, but found that the crowd of worshippers was so great as to make it uncomfortable for us to attempt to go inside the building. We therefore clambered up the steep stone staircase that led through a minaret to the base of the dome.

A pigeon flew out just in time to save us from trampling on her two snow-white eggs, laid on a step. Bats were invisible, but the smell showed that they were hanging above the stairs. The balustrade outside gave an excellent view of the surrounding country, desert as far as and across the railway, and green towards the riverain.

I pointed out the different sides of the mausoleum faced with blue tiles of Multan pottery.

"That side is M'Carthy's work. He was in these parts eighteen years, and was the first to take over the management of the shrine."

"Whew! Eighteen years!" exclaimed Vernon. "And we people grumble if we are kept in a district like this for more than four."

"This is the Trollope side," I continued. "You must have just come out about the time he was bagged."

"Yes," said Miles. "Knifed on a snipe jheel, I remember."

"It was lucky for some people he was knifed in Peshawar. Our Mahommedans would have lynched their co-religionist if they could have got at the mis-

guided fanatic, and would have taken revenge on his family as well."

"Was Trollope long in these parts?" asked Rutherford. "He must have been very popular."

"Six years; but he was on the inside of our folk in a twelvemonth. I always congratulate myself that I was under him for a short time. There is a class of Englishman for whom the native will do anything, and he was one of that kind."

We talked on for a time about officers who had left their mark on the district, and of their deeds. Presently Rutherford, leaning over the balustrade, called out—

"Look at the hair-cutting down there."

Now the first hair-cutting for boys in our country is usually done at a shrine, and from our elevated position we could see a group gathered round a barber, away from the crowd that surged about in front of the tomb.

A small boy of five was under the artist's care, and a neat diamond pattern was shaved off the crown of his head. A goat bleated dismally on the edge of the group.

"That will be dead in a minute or two," I said. "The hair of the boy will be wrapped in its skin and burned."

"What is the idea?" asked Rutherford.

"The old notion of vicarious sacrifice, I suppose. The hair of the boy, plus the goat, propitiates the deity and saves the boy's life."

"Stand back a bit," I said suddenly. "There is Ali Baksh with a cow-bell. Don't let him spot us."

We stood and watched the nephew of Sharu Khan with three or four followers. They approached a spreading *jal* bush, whose branches were bedecked with votive rags and innumerable cow-bells. Ali Baksh produced an enormous bell, and his companions added smaller ones to those already on the tree.

"Come on," I said, hurrying off down the steep stairs. "I must say something to our friend."

We slipped down, and passed out of the gate just as Ali Baksh came through.

"I trust you have only been praying for sick or lost cattle, Ali Baksh," I said meaningly. "The omens are unfavourable for finding strange cattle in these days."

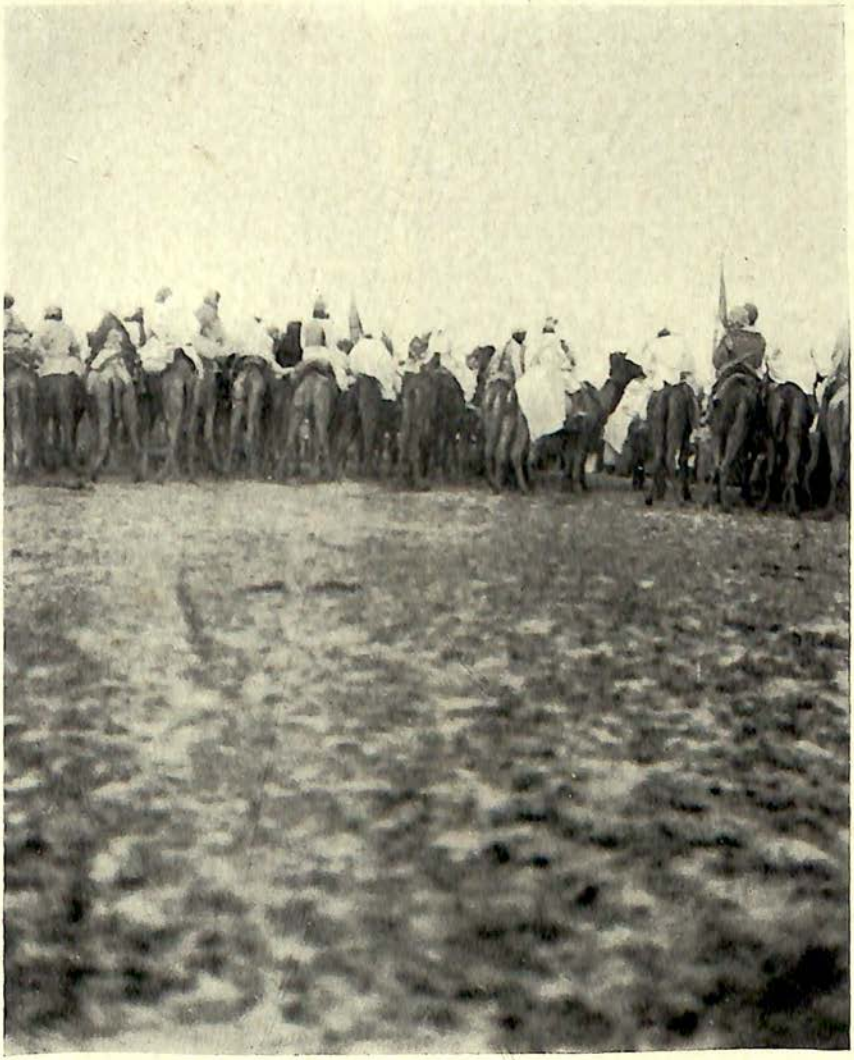
Ali Baksh turned yellow.

"Repentance! repentance! I have no cattle to seek," he protested. "May I have to divorce my wife if I look for strange cattle."

But it was now time to get on to the *Doda* ground, so, removing our mocassins and leaving Ali Baksh to his conscience, we rode off. It is to be doubted, however, whether Ali Baksh was much troubled by that organ. The consciousness of sin does not worry this class of man in our part of the country, and his chief commandment is, "Thou shalt not be found out."

"This is a fine crowd," said Vernon as we passed outside the long rows of camels on the outer rim of the crowd, and, selecting a suitable break, forced our way through to the front. We came out on a square with sides two hundred and fifty yards long.

Squatting, sitting, standing, on horseback and on



Back view of spectators at the Doda.

camel-back, were at least twelve thousand men,—all men, for there are no women spectators at public shows in the East, except, possibly, a performer like the Barrel, herself a public character. Chairs in the shade had been arranged, and we sat awhile amid the more plump and sedate of native officials and gentry. Two masses of brown athletes were collected on the north side of the square, separated by a group of patrons and privileged supporters.

We sat for a time, but nothing much happened. The musicians made a constant uproar, and occasionally a couple of the competitors would bound into the arena with wild cries and resonant smacks of the thighs. But they returned to their places, and nothing happened.

"What's up?" asked Vernon.

"Let's go and see," I said; and we stepped across, holding up a hand to keep back a serried phalanx of would-be followers.

We found a heated group of patrons gesticulating at each other.

"What is it all about? I can't make head or tail of it," said Vernon.

Even I could not follow the *Jatki* language when accompanied by such vociferations and general uproar. I shook the one-eyed Allu by the arm and told him to explain.

"Well, it is this Sialgarh pair, sent by Sardar Ghulam Haider Khan, that is making all the fuss. They want to run against the Butcher and the Sial, but Mallik Massu and Sher Bahadur insist on the Pathans running against that couple."

"Why can't they run against your pair — the Cobbler and the Fisherman?"

"We have tried that, but they say they have won both in Sialgarh Badshahabad, and are not to be fobbed off on the second best pair here."

"Why not make them run against both? Are they young?"

"Oh, they could run, but the Butcher won't agree. He will have to be out three times on his first bout, and that will cook him at his age."

By this time the crowd of patrons had surged on to us. Massu and Bahadur had made common cause for once. Sharu Khan was with the Sialgarh side, and Ali Baksh was gesticulating with him, until I asked what connection they had with the Sialgarh people. They knew I alluded to "the passing of the rope"—the term used for the transference of stolen cattle—and this, coupled with the cow-bell incident, sobered them, but there were plenty more to shout. The parties themselves sat quiet in their corners.

The time had come, I felt, for the loud order, and I gave my fiat.

"The Pathans against the Butcher couple, and the Sialgarhs against the Hinjras."

The Sialgarh men got up and attempted to remonstrate, but I replied that such was my command. Till then they had given out that they would go home rather than run against any pair but the best; but with Orientals the word "order" is a potent one, and after all, they had not come all the distance not to run.

Other doubtful points solved themselves, and the younger pairs were sent out to compete.

"What exactly is the idea?" asked Vernon. "Each man of each pair runs out against the other two. That much I have gathered, but what counts a win?"

"The catchers win, of course, if they catch and hold. The single runner has to pass between the pair after handing each off with a blow on the chest. It sounds simple, but is not so easy to do."

The game began, and we watched all the varieties that it can produce.

"No collaring low is allowed, Vernon," I said. The old footballer shook his head disdainfully, and grunted in disapproval when he saw a catcher shoot himself forward on his back, and clip up the runner's legs with his own, the second pursuer casting himself on the pursued before the latter could recover.

"Ah, that's better," he added later, as a strapping young lad fended off one adversary with a push that cast him on his back, and striking the second an almost equally staggering blow, passed between them with loud cries of "Ali! Ali! Ali!" Bounding and slapping his thighs he reached us, and touched our feet in turn.

"*Shabash!*" I cried; "who are you?"

"One of the Butcher's pupils," was the reply. It was four or five to one on the catchers in any well-matched pair, and the pairs had been picked with the utmost skill. The runners feinted this way and then that, and tried to carry one catcher away with them, leaving the other on the wrong leg. But arm-lock,

wrist-lock, leg-catch, and straightforward collar — all were employed, and few escaped.

At last came the turn of the better men. One of the proud athletes from Sialgarh with long black ringlets went out into the open. The Cobbler and the Fisherman, two short but thick-set men with low-caste countenances and close-cropped hair, followed.

"Now they're off," cried Vernon, whose enthusiasm was kindled. "But what are they up to?" he added, as, after a feint this way and that and a short run, the three came bounding back with thigh-slappings and cries to all the saints.

"Oh, the great men always have a false run once, just to show themselves off to the public."

The Butcher and Pathans gave a similar empty display, while the younger men continued to compete, and then came the hush of the real contest.

The Sialgarh first string led off at a tremendous bat, after a feint that cast the Fisherman off his balance, but the Cobbler kept near him, yet away from him, until his mate closed up again.

Sher Bahadur, viewing the bout with the eye of the expert, shook his head.

"Why does he not strike?" he said. "He will be beaten."

The three Hinjra squireens, fast friends for the moment, began to yell wildly in anticipation of the victory of their pair.

"Strike! strike!" taunted the Cobbler, pushing out his chest when he saw his mate near enough. The

Sialgarh man struck him heavily, but the sturdy Cobbler did not give way an inch and threw himself on to his man. The runner turned to jink off, but the Fisherman was too close, and down the three went in the sand.

A yell went up from the crowd in delight at the defeat of the proud outsider.

His mate did no better. What pace and feinting could do, he did; but when he had to get in his own work he was done, and simply too. He struck at the Fisherman, who locked the striking arm above and below with a vice-like grip before it could be withdrawn, and held him at a standstill.

The long lithe Pathans, on the other hand, had the best of their runs. The Butcher's mate did his utmost, casting the first Pathan heavily, but the Butcher could not go the pace set, and was not up in time to complete the collar.

The second Pathan was faster still, and proceeded, after a burst of full steam, to run round the pair that was running him down. Facing them with his open hands held low in front of him, he kept a safe distance, though complying with the rule of not running away. The Butcher gave up, winded.

All the couples then changed over, and the single runners combined against each member of the late catching pairs. There was excitement all the time, and the prowess of the lesser men was noted carefully by all the patrons. Any man who had won single-handed was watched to see if he could catch as well as run.

The Sialgarh pair sat sullenly together until their turn to catch came round.

The Cobbler, squat but tricky, started badly, running down wind with his pair level and parallel to him. With a sudden jerk, however, he planted his heel sharply and turned back in his track, throwing the unprepared partners off their balance. They were back on him in no time, but, when first one and then the other essayed a fruitless hold, they were just too far apart to aid each other, and he won through.

The crowd was overjoyed at the further discomfiture of the outsiders, who had thought themselves too good for any but Hazratabad's best couple, but yet had been defeated by the second-best pair.

The Sial was thrown heavily by one of the Pathans, single-handed, though he had learnt from his teacher the art of feinting and had the Pathan six yards from his mate.

"The Pathans are too good, Mallik Massu," I said; "you will lose your bet."

The grazier beamed with his fat smile, and said, "May you live in all prosperity. They are not too good."

While I was talking the Fisherman went out.

The Sialgarh men started towards him, holding hands to begin with, but all alert to change direction whatever foot he should lead off on.

Their blood was boiling, and they were determined to win. The Fisherman was equally on his mettle, and ran off boldly. Crash! went the first man on him, and he fell on his back, leaping on his feet again in an

instant, but with no balance to withstand the onset of the second. The latter sat on his chest, and then, *nefas infandum*, as he rose, *drew his open palm down in front of the Fisherman's face.*

The fat was in the fire now, and no mistake.

"Come, Bahadur Khan," I shouted. "Out with me, Inspector Sahib. Rutherford, please stand by the runners."

"What's up?" asked Vernon in amazement.

But before he spoke the Fisherman had locked both hands in the Baloch's ringlets and was tearing at them despite the buffets of the third man. Fortunately, we had been so keen to watch that we were out in time. From all parts of the ground individuals had broken out to join in the fray, while the Hinjra squireens and their friends were off after us. But we had a start, and while Bahadur Khan and the police officer separated the combatants, Vernon and I were able to roar orders to the others to return to their places. Rutherford and a couple of constables had to do a bit of hitting before the *Doda* men would settle down.

"I did not really catch what they did to excite such rage," said Miles, as we returned, somewhat breathless, to our place by the runners.

"Put a 'bujja' on him," I said—"drew his palm down the man's face."

"What does that mean?"

"I don't know myself: even Bahadur Khan could not tell me why it is considered an insult, and he is always rather pleased than otherwise to give an explanation, especially if the explanation be a lewd one. Do you know, Rutherford?"

"No; it must be traditional. Anyway, we stopped a fine fight. All *Doda* was prohibited in the north of the district for about five years, owing to some previous riots of a sanguinary character."

"I know. Your predecessor wanted me to stop it too, but I asked if all football was stopped because of an occasional referee-baiting. A fight or two is better than no *Doda*."

It took some time to quiet down the assembly, but they all wanted to see the Butcher, and there was soon a lull.

The Butcher moved out heavily, evidently feeling the effects of his runs in pursuit. However, he did a bound and smack just to show he was all there, and stood ready.

The Pathans, full of confidence, meant to end the matter in the one triumphant rush of youth, and yet, when the Butcher's movements gave the signal that they might start, somehow or other they were not together when the first reached him.

Crash! came his right hand, a quick turn and a buffet of the other hand on the second man's breast, and he was bounding slowly but delightedly towards us.

"All over," I said. "Seems simple, but the simplicity is like that of John Roberts' billiards."

The crowd surged out into the arena, displaying the varying emotions of spectators who have won and lost. Mallik Massu's fat sides shook as he poked jests at his discomfited friend Bahadur.

We sent for our horses and rode home through the crowd, with Ahmed Khan and a couple of mounted

policemen in front. The path was better cleared, however, by the drummers, who marched ahead of the conquering Butcher, who, on a diminutive nag that had been lent him, rode triumphantly before us all.

CHAPTER XV.

"NOT HALF BAD."

RUTHERFORD left us as soon as we got back, having arranged to lunch in the train on his way north to the scene of the murderous riot over the boys' wrestling-match.

While we were saying our farewells to him, the Pair of Spectacles came and asked us to play football with the boys that evening. In a weak moment we agreed, much to the satisfaction of the school inspectors.

"We must encourage athletics," I murmured, the enthusiasm for games a bit worn off by the prolonged sports of the Fair. "Well, it won't take much time, which is a blessing."

"All right; I shall be there," said Vernon.

There was not much work done that afternoon, for, to most visitors, the *Doda* marked the end of their pilgrimage to the holy shrine, and all our squires were anxious to pay us final visits. Some had only their old desires and ambitions to go over and discuss for the hundredth time, and they were told once more to keep them for another occasion.

After tea we strolled out in the best costumes we

could rig up to play football. I am slim and able to stand long distances on camel and horseback, but the spring of youth is gone, and I can no longer sprint with the pace for which I had once some fame. The boys were very minute and undersized, and, often as I thought I was going strong, a horrid little bare toe would be pushed forward and I would find the ball no longer at my feet. Vernon, though a Rugby Forward, thought that back at the Soccer game was best suited for his weight, and he kicked prodigiously at anything that came near him.

At last I got a chance to make a goal, and, putting in a dash with the glow of old-time vigour, made an onslaught on the goal.

The boy at back met the ball just as I was taking it on. It stood still with our opposing weights, but though my foot was stopped my body went on, and I fell to the ground with a twisted knee.

That ended my game for the day, and my exercise for more days, and I hobbled back to lie up at my tent.

I had got rid of the crowd of sympathisers who attended me home, and was being massaged by Nawab as only an Indian knows how to massage, when Ahmed Khan, the Sub-Inspector of Police, was announced, and came in.

"What is it, Thanadar Sahib?" I asked, noting an air of anxiety on his usually jaunty countenance.

"Two horsemen dressed like Baloches, armed with guns, swords, and pistols, have just gone past. I called to them to stop, but they paid no attention, so I sent Ali Baksh, constable, to ask them for

their licences. They replied that they had many Thanadars under them, and rode onwards."

"Cheeky rascals! Well, what then?"

"I have sent Sergeant Hira Singh off on my horse to call them back, and have come over at once to report."

"All right. Let me know when Hira Singh returns. You had better send off Ali Baksh on a nag too."

Ahmed Khan saluted and withdrew. Vernon came in shortly after to condole with me over my injury, and to see how bad it was, and I told him the story.

"What would the lords of many Thanadars be doing here?" he remarked. "If they had been visiting the shrine it would be another matter."

"Well, we shall soon hear. This silly accident of mine will alter our plans. The assistant surgeon tells me that I won't ride for a day or two, so I shall go back and sit firmly in my office chair at head-quarters for these few days, and you must bump along doing my inspections with your own. Sorry for you. It means a lot of exercise, and will keep your weight down."

"That won't do me any harm," replied Vernon. "I shall arrange rides and court on alternate days."

I smiled contentedly, because, though I like to do my own work, it is good to know to whom to leave it in case of emergency.

We were half-way through dinner when Sub-Inspector Ahmed Khan hurried in almost before he could be announced.

"Sir, evil men are abroad," he blurted out. "Hira Singh has only escaped with his life."

"Be coherent, and don't hurry," I said, endeavouring to calm his excitement. "What happened to Hira Singh?"

"He reports that he followed the two riders and caught them up. When he ordered them to return, they refused, saying they were Mahommedans and would obey no infidel Sikhs. Hira Singh, in a temper, started to close on the more impudent of the two, but he raised his rifle and threatened to fire."

"What happened then?" interposed Vernon.

Now Mahommedans and Sikhs have not yet forgotten the days when they fought like cat and dog, and, as the Sikh has established a reputation for courage, the recollection of Hira Singh's pusillanimity was grateful to Ahmed Khan.

"He arrived at the Thana without his turban, clinging to the neck of his pony," he said with a grin.

"Well, this is serious anyway. I am afraid, Vernon, it is a case of boot and saddle for you, but get your meal well inside you, and turn out your camel sowar and a servant. They can take a rug or two and some food and drink in case you don't get back to-night."

"I am for it. I should like to see these folk."

"Now, Ahmed Khan, you should send your watchmen off to collect some more riders, and borrow a pony or two for your constables. Jalal Shah and Dullan Shah of the local men are young and energetic. You should get some Hinjras also: Ghulam,

I know, has not left yet. You probably know others that will turn out."

"Certainly, Sahib."

"Let me know when you are ready, Thanadar Sahib, and I will be with you," said Vernon.

Ahmed Khan withdrew, and without fuss dinner was pushed on. Vernon's pony, the riding camel, and the servant with bedding, food, sodas, kettle, tea, &c., were soon ready.

"I am off now," called Vernon, moving across to the police-station where a considerable gathering of natives was collected.

"Good luck to you," I replied. "Confound this knee. Serves me right for playing with kids at my age. It is a fine night for a ride. I wish I could be with you."

The moon was at the full, and I hobbled into a chair in the open to see the cavalcade depart. In answer to Ahmed Khan's messengers some squireens had come. Others had illnesses or other troubles to hold them back. One of the saintly tribe could not come because his own saint had descended on him and he had to serve his needs. All men in the Western Punjab have saints, and saints have greater saints to guide them in the right path.

A clattering woke all our attention, as a horseman thundered down the dusty road. It turned out to be Ali Baksh, constable, who dismounted in a great state of excitement. Ahmed Khan brought him over to me.

"What has happened, Ali Baksh?" I inquired.

"Your Honour is the bestower of wealth. May

your descendants live and multiply. God keep you pleasant."

"Good; but what is your news? Is all well?"

"All is well, save for those ruffians," he panted, still unable to come to his story proper.

"Proceed, oh brother," put in Ahmed Khan. "What has happened?"

"Well," replied Ali Baksh, recovering his breath gradually as he spoke, "I rode after the two men, and caught them up just before sunset, three miles north on the highroad. It was just past the village of Hindal. I asked them who they were, and why they would not return. They replied that they were stewards of the Diwan of Sind, and beholden to no other power."

"What do they mean by the Diwan of Sind?" asked Vernon.

"I don't know, and I know the machinery of the Sind administration more or less," I replied.

No one could enlighten us, and Ali Baksh went on.

"I told them they must return or they would be arrested. They said they did not care for me. I replied that the Thanadar had wired to all the police-stations on the highroad to catch them."

"Excellent," said Vernon. "I bet you, Ahmed Khan, you never thought of that."

A Pathan is not easily abashed, and Ahmed Khan had an answer of sorts.

"They turned off the highroad," continued Ali Baksh, "and I followed them. Of the two one appeared a simple stolid Baloch with long ringlets. The other was dressed as a Pathan with smart

clothes and close-cropped hair, but he did not look a high-class Pathan."

"How would he know that?" asked Vernon.

"Every man in the East carries his label on him to the discerning eye," I replied, with a nod to the constable to continue.

"The Pathan was the leader, and kept shouting at me to go back. I said I had my orders and could not disobey them. I followed for some time, but at last the Pathan said, 'If you don't go you will be shot.' I paid no heed, but kept on after them at a couple of hundred yards' distance. Suddenly the Pathan raised his rifle and fired at me. Allah diverted the bullet, and here I am."

"It won't do to ask the time he took over the distance," I said, "but this is a serious job, Vernon. You had better take some weapon. Have you a revolver?"

"No," replied Vernon; "I never could use one when I had one."

"Very well, you can go one better. Take your shot-gun and swan-shot cartridges."

Vernon hurried back into the tent for his gun and ammunition, while I took count of Ahmed Khan's little band, and set myself to give them as much encouragement as I could.

"Ha! ha! Ghulamu Khan," I cried. "You are as alert as usual. Ready to show the young bloods how to behave, eh?"

Ghulamu smiled his quaint square grin, and was obviously pleased. Jalal Shah and Dullan Shah pushed themselves forward for recognition, and so

did some others of the more stout-hearted gentry who had joined them.

The whole party then mounted, taking with them three lanterns with which to track through the desert from the point to which Ali Baksh was able to take them.

"Good luck, Vernon!" I cried. "Shahbash! Ahmed Khan. God be with you, Ghulamu. Salaam, Jalal Shah. May fortune be with you all."

As they moved off there was the cheery cry of "Dum Bahawal Hak-A-."

I hoped that the Multan Saint would answer their invocation, and retired to bed to be massaged once more by Nawab on the injured knee. I was soon asleep without any apprehension for the safety of Vernon, but I think I should hardly have slept so soundly had I known what was going to occur.

About eight next morning Vernon rode in, and, hurrying in to my tent, grabbed a soda from a side table.

"Thirsty?" I said.

"Yes, and done up too," he replied wearily. "Those fellows had a tremendous lead, and we did not track them down till 4 A.M. It was half track by lantern, and half inquiry from well to well in the desert."

"I suppose they had to stick to the line from well to well even in the winter. How many did you pass?"

"Only four, and yet that meant eight miles from the place we left the highroad. Then we came to another well, and an old woman told us our fellows

were in a hut. So we rushed them, and after a little bother they were bagged. When I saw it was all right I galloped home. I had a drink of soda-water before I left, but thought it was no good sitting there, so here I am."

"Quite right; I agree in always finishing a job. Well, I expect you won't want to be awake much longer."

"No. If my litigants think I am going to hurry to try their cases to-day, they are vastly mistaken."

"Righto. Ta! Ta!"

Vernon disappeared, and after a spell of work I had my breakfast. I was just settling down to the morning's revenue cases when Ahmed Khan was announced.

"Allah Hu Akbar. God is great," he said, "and the merciful saints preserved us."

"Are you well? I trust all was successful?"

"Yes, by your Honour's might and Vernon Sahib's prowess all was well, but Allah was on our side. Vernon Sahib will have told you all."

I knew enough of Vernon to know that there was something in his "little bother," so I encouraged Ahmed Khan to tell the whole tale.

Ghulamu and Jalal Shah had followed into the room, and after salutations had squatted down to do chorus.

The story started necessarily from the beginning, and I had filled my fountain-pen and addressed a couple of envelopes before it was necessary to prick up my ears.

"When we reached the hamlet," said Ahmed Khan,

now at last fairly in his stride, "an aged beldame, aunt of Satan in appearance but excellent in reality, informed us where the men were. We went near their hut, and I called out, 'Surrender in the King's name!' All of a sudden three shots were fired. God of His goodness sent the bullets astray, and Vernon Sahib, Hira Singh, Ghulamu, and I rushed forward."

"I was there too," interposed Jalal Shah, "but I missed the hut."

"Yes, the rest of our party were missing altogether, but," put in Ahmed Khan, trying to do his best for the Syed, "Jalal Shah joined us at the finish."

"Well, where did you rush to?" I asked.

"We tumbled, as we thought, headlong into the hut where the reports came from, but found ourselves in one empty of men but with two horses inside. We were just going on when the men came out shouting 'we are on you.' I seized Vernon Sahib and pulled him against the wall with me. The room was at once filled with smoke, as the rascals fired at us. Directly afterwards we fired back."

"Did Vernon Sahib fire?" I asked.

"No, sir, and he cursed us awfully. He was right, because we could not pursue with unloaded arms. Ali Baksh had carried his shot-gun, but had disappeared. We heard the muzzle-loader next door being rammed down, and it was loaded before we, too, were loaded. Then ensued a parley, and I shouted out 'Who are you, oh brothers?'

"'We are Mahommedans. And who are you?'

"'I am a Pathan,' I replied softly, 'and from your noble manner I think you must be a Pathan also.'

"'Yes, I am a Pathan. But repeat the Creed.'

"I recited the Kalima to them, and they were more or less satisfied. I asked them who they were and what they were doing. They replied that they were travellers, and asked why we had stopped them. I replied that we only wanted their noble selves to show their licences, merely as a matter of form. The conversation went on like this for some time till the dawn began to break. I had great trouble in preventing Vernon Sahib from speaking or rushing out. 'Peace, Sahib,' I urged, 'they cannot go without their horses in this desert.'

"When it was light I called out that I, a Mahommedan and a Pathan, was coming out to meet them. I feared greatly, but Vernon Sahib's eye was on me and my heart was big. I found both men sitting in the doorway with their guns ready to fire. For a second I hesitated, then went boldly on and shook the principal by the hand. They rose and came outside. On seeing this Vernon Sahib and Hira Singh came out towards them.

"'Infidels again,' yelled the Pathan, and raising his weapon pointed it at Vernon Sahib. I made a dash towards him, but before I could reach a wonderful thing happened. The Pathan fired, but his shot went towards the sky."

"What had happened?" I asked.

"I don't know, your Honour, how it was done, but Vernon Sahib rushed at him, stooping low, and seizing his legs threw him on his back."

It had evidently been the *Doda* that had reminded Vernon of his Rugby football, and I was not surprised at the Pathan's ignorance of the maxim, "collar him low."

Ahmed Khan went on.

"Then I seized his Baloch companion, and Hira Singh assisted me."

Just then Vernon came out, somewhat sleepy and angry at Ahmed Khan's loud voice.

However, he laughed at the remembrance.

"Yes, old boy, you should have seen Ghulamu helping me to sit on the Pathan's head," he said. "And the way the empty horizon filled up with squireens, syeds, and constables, when we had bagged our men, was a surprise. I thought that every one of them was back all the way to the Fair, but they turned up from the neighbouring buildings. You must pat Ahmed Khan on the back. He may be a talker, but he did not do half bad."

I thought to myself that in my report of the occurrence I would mention that Mr Vernon did not do half bad.

"Well," I said, "I should like to see the heroes."

They were produced, and I discovered that they were a sergeant and a trooper from a lonely militia post in the wilds of British Balochistan. Censured for a somewhat serious breach of discipline, the sergeant had broken out, and had started for his native hills in the Black Mountain behind Hazara, taking with him the Baloch, who was utterly under his thumb. The ponies, the arms, and all had been borrowed for the enterprise.

The sergeant refused to admit any criminality. He maintained that a demoniacal spirit had seized him, and that he had staggered blindly to one of the famous Sind shrines, that of Lal Shahbaz of Sehwan. There the demon had left him, but he found that he had been so long away without leave that he dare not return. Hence he was going on to another shrine in the north when this episode happened.

"I am afraid the Session Judge will not acknowledge the influence of demons," I said.

I then gave my commendations to all the natives and said farewell to Vernon.

"You will just have time to do your inspections," I said.

"We will meet again when we go on the river."

CHAPTER XVI.

DOWN THE INDUS.

VERNON and I were sitting at lunch in our boat as we drifted down the Indus. I was worried with the thought whether I should finally decide on a seven-year sentence in one of those brutal cases that are not peculiar to the East, or let the rascal off with the less severe punishment of five years.

As the cheese came round I stiffened myself.

"Leniency, my dear Vernon," I said, didactically, "does not pay except with beginners at the milder forms of crime. Never forget that, in your mind, the individual criminal before you should not exist. You are only concerned with the effect of your order on society in general, and especially on the innocent members of society who will be protected by it from those who would otherwise prey upon them."

I was prosing on in this vein, but after a time became aware that Vernon was not paying much attention.

"Didn't you expect to be in camp by lunch?" he asked, instead of taking on with my more substantial talk.

A little amused at his scorn of serious subjects, I replied, "I thought that we should have been, but don't forget that we finished off the quarrels of the three Hinjras at last. It was good of the old Pir to come up to help us."

Vernon seized my glasses. I require few luxuries other than cartridges, but glasses in Hazratabad are useful weapons of war, and I had bought an especially fine pair on the proceeds of success in a Club Sweep. With them one could see for an immense distance.

As we rounded the next bend Vernon cried, "That's all right. There are the tents. Look!"

I had a perfunctory glance, and then, with a lack of interest designedly provocative, went on worrying with the official problems which were running in my head.

"I think, you know, you were not half vigorous enough in showing up that Revenue Accountant at Adamgarh. If you had pressed more, we might have landed him in jail, but as it is, I am not sure whether he can even be dismissed."

"Oh, I think he can, and I am ready to explain the whole affair in more detail. But do you see? There are the tents, and every one seems to have come out to welcome us," said Miles, his eyes glued to the glasses. "I think I see the two ladies with Humpie," he went on; "and there is a man standing with them to the right of that crowd of natives. Looks extraordinarily thin for Benson," he commented, with a puzzled air.

"Is it a *Sahib?*" I asked. "It may be Shahbaz

Khan or some other native dressed in English fashion. Let me have a look."

I took up the glasses and stared intently for a time, while the boat drew nearer and nearer. Then, as I realised the truth, I smiled to myself. Mrs Benson had seen through my little plan, and this was her counter-move. Miles was not to have it all his own way. I said nothing, however, but handed back the glasses to Vernon, with the remark that it must be some friend of the Bensons.

The suggestion was enough, and, with the first glance, he gave an exclamation of disgust.

"My God!" he said. "It's Vickers."

It obviously was Vickers. "But, after all," I thought to myself consolingly, "it is perhaps all for the best."

I had heard something of Vickers' reputation, and at close quarters company manners cannot be kept up for ever.

"Funny that women can't spot a wrong-un when they see one!" exclaimed Vernon. "But I am surprised at Benson. I should not have thought that Vickers was his sort."

I realised what I could not quite put into words, that Benson had not much to say in the matter. All women are match-makers, and Mrs Benson was no exception. She, doubtless, recognised Miles' solid qualities, but then she had not seen through Vickers, and she was evidently bent on giving her sister an opportunity of seeing as much as she cared for of her more brilliant admirer.

"Yes, it's Vickers," I said, with a shrug of the

shoulder. "I suppose he has got a week or ten days' leave from Filgate. Life is more leisurely in a Native State than with us."

"What is the good of Vickers down the Indus?" replied Vernon testily. "He does not care for real trouble in shooting."

Our boat drew near. I saw Mrs Benson convulsively clutch at Humpie to prevent him falling into the water in his excitement at seeing his old friend Vernon. Miss Barbara, though she had her squire in attendance, was waving us friendly signals, and Benson's sun-burnt face appeared at the door of his tent as our boat approached the landing-stage.

"Hullo! old man," he called out. "Had any sport?"

"Not since we started," was my reply. "Geese were off the river, and crocodiles inside it till nearly lunch-time. Besides, we were working to be more free when with you."

The steersman leant heavily on to the outer pole of his rudder, and three of the oarsmen threw themselves on to one oar, and thus we came clumsily to the bank. Another boatman, armed with a heavy spiked pole, leapt to shore and drove a stake into the powdery soil. He shifted his grip again, and the boat, held tight by the thick matted rope, stopped opposite the ramp which had been prepared for us.

The Bensons welcomed us effusively.

Vernon's greetings were rendered somewhat informal by the excitement of Humpie, who threw himself into his arms, shouting, "Mr Vernon, Mr

Vernon, I have brought the gun you gave me. Won't we shoot lots?"

There was quite a cordial tone in Miss Barbara's voice as she welcomed Vernon, and I noticed that he held his own in the conversation, even though Vickers had assumed a proprietary attitude and was offensive accordingly. Perhaps the sight of some of the mallard feathers which he had given her in the girl's *khaki*-covered hat encouraged Vernon, but he certainly appeared to be starting on a better footing. He was less *gauche* and more confident of himself, and, whatever the young lady's feelings may have been towards Vickers, she seemed genuinely glad to see Vernon again.

A little crowd of native notables stood respectfully apart until our first greetings were over and we had time to attend to them. Shahbaz Khan was there again, and so was the saint of saints, looking the more jovial because that awkward nephew of his had by misfortune shuffled off this mortal coil. India is a land of swift deaths, and if the malicious did talk of powdered glass, well, there are malicious folk in every place. The three Hinjra squireens had come down with the office staff, and were buzzing gratefully round their priestly arbitrator, and they and others greeted us warmly.

"Is this a ferry?" I asked, seeing that there were other boats moored to the bank besides our own.

"Speak thus to my lord," was the sententious reply of the Baloch chief. "The ferry is two miles down."

"Then why these extra boats?" I inquired.

"Oh!" broke in Benson, "that is easily explained. On the day after to-morrow we get into the country of Sirdar Ghulam Haider, who has arranged for us to witness no end of festivities in honour of the marriage of his cousin to his daughter. He loathes this cousin, and would clear him out of the country if he dared," he added in an undertone, "but these fellows like their girls to marry within their family, and the little nephew is too young."

"Well, I suppose we must look on him as enlightened, even if he gives his child to a man he abhors, as it is something that he did not give her to the nephew. You know as well as I do the troubles that arise when girls grow up to find their husbands still children of ten or twelve."

"Never mind discussing the problems of other people's social systems now," said Benson with a chuckle. "What do you think of our flotilla?" and with all the gentry following we walked down to compare the boats.

Quite an imposing array they looked drawn up alongside the bank. The two house-boats proper for the Bensons and ourselves, each with two rooms hutted over with reed and mud. There was a third for the horses and a fourth for the tents, while the fifth, one-hutted for native clerks, also accommodated a cow and its calf in the space left behind the single compartment.

"Any difficulty with milk supply?" I asked, a little surprised.

"Not at all," smiled Benson. "Only mothers have fads, and these beasts accompany us everywhere, fed

under my wife's eye, and I may say clothed also. One sees them at night and in the early morning resplendent in coats made out of our old cotton-stuffed quilts."

We compared our respective rooms. Mine were large but plain, except for some hangings that Bahadur Khan had put in. Benson was equally beholden to Shahbaz for the decorations, though the prosaic expenses of labour, mud, and grass had of course been paid by himself. Shahbaz had insisted on a stucco interior with the plastered mud inside the rooms, and had broken out into frescoes of yellow lions intermingled with blue stars.

"Your plan is all very well as poetry," I said to Benson. "But in prose you have cut down your room space. Our plaster is outside, and so we get all the floor clear. You will have to use our boat for meals when we are all together."

It was thus arranged that one section of our boat should be the common dining-room, and the other for office for Vernon and myself. Benson and Vickers had one-half of the other boat, while the ladies and Humpie shared the other.

"What about little boats?" I asked Benson.

"We are not well off," he replied. "What they produced as a little boat was the smallest type of craft used by the Kehals, but it is a clumsy affair. What have you?"

"I have a wooden contraption which we call the Dreadnought. It is a cross between a boat and a punt, and only draws nine inches. There is also a canvas boat which floats in three inches," I replied.

"Well, then, you are well set up," said Benson.

"The weak point about the canvas boat," I demurred, "is one's own nerves. It does seem a bit risky to go on a river like the Indus with only a layer of canvas between you and the bottom. However, as a matter of fact, if you avoid violent movements it is quite safe. Do you notice how well it and the Dreadnought have been screened with brushwood? We'll make the geese sit up."

Shahbaz hovered about us, evidently very proud of his decorative triumphs. He led up the artist to receive our commendations,—none other than our friend Abdulla, the Well-wisher of the people of God, whose oily countenance beamed with self-satisfaction.

Having thoroughly inspected the boats we returned to our tents, our native friends taking their leave with the usual quaint string of compliments and good wishes.

We stopped on our way, hearing a cackle of excitement and consternation from the servants' quarters.

"What on earth is the matter?" said Mrs Benson, coming out as the air rang with "Wah! wah!" and "God be praised!"

The question was answered by Mamdu, who appeared in a state of tremendous excitement, with Dinah, Humpie's nondescript spaniel puppy, held at arm's-length in one hand, and a battered, almost unrecognisable small object in the other.

"I was only just in time," he panted, with his usual monkey-like grin. "She had it almost eaten. It would have blown up and killed us all."

"It's a cartridge," roared Benson, in fits of laughter. "There's no doubt now as to Dinah's being a real sporting dog."

Mamdu was much impressed at the thought of the danger which had been averted. "'Twas on Pir Ali Nur I called for aid, and 'twas his holy presence that saved us."

Coming out of the tent after tea, we found a group of promising young mares that had been brought up for Benson's inspection. He had let the leading men in that neighbourhood know that he wished to purchase a young one, and as the whole country-side goes in, more or less, for horse-breeding and horse-keeping, a number of farmers had brought up their stock for inspection.

We all stood watching with admiration Benson's method of scientific bargaining, most of Mrs Benson's time being occupied in restraining her excited off-spring from going too near the hoofs of restive fillies. Dick has always been considered a good judge of a horse, and his opinion is much valued even among the natives of the countryside. It is true that with them a lucky mark will often outweigh curby hocks or spavined legs, but other things equal, they are fully capable of appreciating a good animal. As I came up Dick asked the price of a likely filly from a rugged looking young fellow.

"Will I lie to you, your Honour, or will I speak the truth?" he said, with an air of exaggerated innocence.

"The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, you young blackguard," said Benson laughing.

Then, catching sight of an obvious defect on a leg which was being carefully kept away from him, he added, "Get along; I have no time to waste over a crock like yours."

Other animals appeared, and were rejected for various reasons.

"Oh, take her away," said Dick intolerantly, with reference to a showy filly who was "dishing" most pronouncedly. "She's throwing a leg away for sale there!"

"'Tis for sale we have her, your Honour," was the ready reply.

"No, I don't want her, I tell you," he said to another and very persistent seller.

"I don't want her either, long life to you," answered the farmer. "That's why I'm trying to sell her to you."

"That's better," said Dick at last, as his choice narrowed down to the pick of the lot. "What do you want for her?"

But the old countryman to whom the mare belonged had all the deep mystery of manner which stamps the horse-dealer in any clime. Name a price for a horse baldly, and at once? Not he!

He looked around, and Benson divined his trouble. "Lend me one of your friends, Travers," he said. "I don't like to ask Shahbaz Khan for fear of seeming to put pressure."

I turned to Mallik Massu, who, bothered with litigation against his tenants, had accompanied us from the last camp, and asked him to come forward to assist in the bargaining.

With a grin of comprehension the fat grazier complied, extending a large paw, which was drawn by the farmer under the folds of his copious outer garment. The juggling that went on under cover of the farmer's cloak was a puzzle to the others, on whose faces amusement and wonder were written large. But it was no novelty to me, and I was able to explain to the party what was happening.

"He will give Massu a whole finger to hold for hundreds of rupees, two joints for fifties, a first joint for scores, and so on. This, in our country, is the proper and diplomatic way to state the price of a horse."

"Four hundred and fifty rupees, he says," at last announced Mallik Massu.

"Ah, well! he's joking," said Dick firmly, turning away in the direction of the tents. "When he's serious again I'll talk to him."

This time-honoured ruse produced the desired effect. One or two friends hastened to lead the seller apart, and tried to persuade him that he had clearly gone too far. At first there were vigorous protests from the owner, but at last he suffered himself to be brought before Dick again.

"Three fifty is my price," said Dick, "and a very good one too for a pony that probably won't measure for polo."

But horse-flesh is not as cheap as once it was in India, and the filly was a good one,—produce of a mare of the breedy Baloch strain and a first-rate Australian sire.

Once more Mallik Massu's hands were requisitioned,

and she eventually passed to Dick for three hundred and seventy-five rupees, or twenty-five pounds sterling of our money.

"Not a bad animal," said Vickers condescendingly as we inspected the new purchase. "But I can't stand a rough country-bred myself."

He looked with a proud air of proprietorship at a valuable English pony which a groom in resplendent livery was just then leading past for its evening exercise.

Turning to the girl he said, "When are you going to ride him, Miss Waynfleete? He has been brought down specially for you, you know."

Miss Barbara murmured some conventional expressions of pleasure, and said that she would like to try him there and then if there was any place to ride to.

"I am afraid," remarked her brother-in-law, "you won't get much of a ride. There is barely an hour left of light, and the ground is very bad here. This place was chosen for convenience of the baggage animals of our large camp, and, if you will remember, the whole of the last part of our ride here was bad going."

"Oh, I think we might try, Miss Waynfleete," said Vickers in a self-assured manner. "I am sure we shall be all right. Will you come too, Mrs Benson, or are you busy?" he added in a tone which plainly said that he hoped she was.

"Thanks, but I have to bathe Humpie," she said pleasantly. "We took the opportunity to give nurse her holiday, as space is limited on the boats. Besides,

I am rather like my husband. We have to ride so much in the ordinary course of camp-life that we don't care much for riding for riding's sake."

Vickers did not invite any one else to join them, and he and the young lady rode off together, Barbara looking her best as she always did on horseback.

They were soon back, however, and I heard Benson greet them with a derisive laugh.

"Hullo, Barbara! Why so soon back?"

"This horse has the most beautiful paces imaginable on good ground," she said, anxious not to seem ungrateful, "but he couldn't understand at all how to pick his way across yawning cracks in sun-dried mud. Besides, when he ought to have kept to a very narrow path he was constantly diverging into dry quicksands. But how was he to tell, poor beast?" she went on. "It looked all nice open country."

"Well, anyway, Vickers," said Benson, "perhaps you will admit now that I am not such a fool as I look. I thought your high-class animal would not be much use here, and I personally would swop it for Mallik Massu's little running nag."

Vickers, like most conceited people, was intolerant of chaff, and walked off looking distinctly annoyed.

Mrs Benson suggested a little Bridge after dinner, and, as Miss Barbara did not seem to want to play and Vickers hung back, there was nothing for it but to drag Vernon in to make up the four with Benson and myself.

"It is not often that we get a chance of a game," said Mrs Benson. "You must excuse our mistakes."

"Well, in your comparatively immense station you probably pay ten times to our one. It is but seldom that we see a fourth in Hazratabad, but never mind, we will play our rustiest or rustic best."

"A good opportunity to show you my photos. of the big shoot, Miss Waynfleete," said Vickers, drawing a chair up to hers and setting a lamp on the small table behind them.

She made a pretty picture in a gown of some silky yellowish material, which set off her clear bright complexion, and lent an added brilliancy to her soft brown eyes.

Vickers seemed to appreciate his good luck to the full, and I could well imagine the inane flow of compliments he was indulging in. I was glad Miles was sitting with his back to them.

A little exclamation of "Oh! whenever did you get that?" from Miss Waynfleete made me look up, and I saw her colour rise as Vickers passed her a photo. much larger than the others which he had just carefully unwrapped.

"Show me, Barbara," said Mrs Benson, who was dummy at the moment.

The girl came across to us with a charming snapshot of herself in her hand. Vickers had evidently had it elaborately enlarged, and I wondered whether that flush of hers betokened pleasure or annoyance.

"Quite pretty," said Mrs Benson, passing it to me.

I saw the red mount to Vernon's forehead and guessed his feelings.

"I think I will change my mind now, and play,

as you have finished your rubber," said Miss Barbara, putting down the photograph.

"No one need cut out," said Benson, rising. "I shall be glad to finish off some arrears," and off he bolted to his tent.

Any one else but Vickers might have been discomfited, but he merely sat down at the younger lady's side to applaud her play, which, truth to tell, was not of the best.

"Whatever made you play a diamond then, and give us the game?" laughed Mrs Benson.

"I couldn't have done anything better, could I, partner?" appealed Miss Barbara to Vernon, and I was not a little astonished when he responded frankly, "It was the one obvious card you shouldn't have played."

The girl took her rebuke in excellent spirit.

"Splendid," she laughed. "Truth before everything."

CHAPTER XVII.

"A WHITE MAN'S DIFFERENT."

"ARISE, servants of God!"

No answer was given by any of the menials to the horseman whose ride from the distant railway station had brought him on to the camp a little before the waking hour.

"Is there any fellow around?" he cried, leading his horse here and there among the servants' tents; but he could obtain no response from any one, and called out more roughly—

"Is there any one dying around here?"

I heard Nawab give a sleepy grunt as he answered, "Oh, shut up! Get on with you; we're busy."

This seemed to me not bad, considering that all the rascals were more or less asleep.

The horseman, having evoked an answer from some one, persisted.

"Well, if you are not dying," he went on in the same hyperbolic manner, "my horse is dead after a long journey with all these post-bags."

"All right," was the grumbling answer. "I am coming, falling."

Once one man moved, all the camp began to stir.

"I have taken my own Sahib's post," said Nawab, brisk enough now to arouse others. "Let some one come to fetch the Little Sahib's post."

Vernon might be twice my size, but, officially, he is the Little Sahib.

There were further cries to Mamdu to fetch the supply of fresh bread and vegetables, and the servants began to buzz about.

A little later Mamdu was at my bedside with tea and toast, and Nawab Khan was unsealing a capacious letter-bag. Disregarding for the time an appalling mass of official papers which came tumbling out, I settled down to my private letters and the news of the world—of England, of India, and the lesser affairs of the Punjab.

I had no need to ask if the servants' tents were coming down. Conciliatory language from Mitha Khan, the lesser tent-pitcher, was followed by the harsh corncrake voice of his superior, Allah Baksh.

"Has there been any mortality among the coolies?" he asked abruptly. "Where are the dead workers? What sickness has befallen them?"

The "dead workers" reluctantly allowed themselves to be hustled about, and, by the time I was out, the servants' gipsy-tents and the "dining-room" were down and in the boat. A stream of men was passing and repassing from the quarters of Vernon and myself with boxes, guns, hats, lanterns, and other innumerable articles.

Vernon was out about the same time and joined me.

"What's to be done?" he said. "We are at our usual stage of preparation, but there is not much life among the other tents."

Cheek-cheek-chik-a-cheek! croaked the harsh voice of a black partridge, and it found several prompt replies.

"Shall we go after them for a bit?" asked Miles.

"No good here," I said. "The morning cries are very deceptive—much cry and little bird."

As we stood irresolute, Benson strolled out towards us in night apparel, disguised by a heavy overcoat.

"I think you fellows had better move off without us. We ought to have talked it out overnight. One can't get women and babies off too early."

"All right," I replied. "We'll go on and fix up an afternoon shoot for you. It is only a short run, so try to be in by three. If we go now we shan't spoil the country for your shooting. The birds will have settled down on the water again, and there will be plenty of fresh flights."

"What about Vickers?" asked Vernon.

"Take him with you if he will go," replied Benson. "It is difficult for us to be always amusing him."

We went over to Vickers' tent, and, looking in, saw nothing but a mass of tumbled bed-clothes.

"How long will you be before you are dressed?" I shouted. "Our boat moves off in a few minutes."

"Go away, you brutes," was the gracious reply. "You demons of the jungle are no company for me. I don't get up till breakfast time."

It was obvious that he was not for moving, and I took Vernon away. He was divided between reluc-

tance to see much of Vickers and dislike at leaving him near Miss Barbara.

We found the boatmen toasting the soles of their bare feet a few inches from a crackling fire. A crisp order or two and our boat was on the move.

Two tables across the front of the cabin were loaded with books, official papers, and materials for correspondence. Another table in the centre was arranged for breakfast. A large camel-trunk full of Acts, Codes, Gazetteers, and maps, stood to one side, and in its lid were cartridges of many kinds. Belts of shot-gun cartridges, and webbing bandoliers full of rifle ammunition, depended in company with cases for cameras and binoculars from a cord round the room. The glasses of each of us lay on the breakfast table, which was further furnished with carriers for holding papers or books. Vernon had propped up 'The Pioneer,' but I had finished the daily papers in bed, and was busy digesting one of the numerous tomes sent by a paternal Government for the benefit of its officials.

At my feet snored Buster, his head pillowed on the 'Indian Penal Code.'

The breakfast proceeded. Both of us were apparently reading hard, but each would grab his glasses for a moment and sweep the horizon at intervals. All to no purpose, however; there was nothing stationary on the river at that time, though a travelling flight would occasionally bring us to our feet to stand with guns at the ready in the doorway, till the birds swerved away and passed by out of range.

"That's a fine bird," said Vernon, pointing across

the water at a prodigious stork with a jet-black beak, head and body, white shoulders and red legs, which stood in solitary grandeur on a mud-bank.

"By Jove! yes," I exclaimed. "You look him up while I describe."

Vernon picked up our treasured book on birds, and turned up the storks and cranes.

"Here you are. The black-and-white stork, that's big enough. No. That won't do; that fellow hasn't red legs. I have it. The black-necked stork."

"Storks are not for the pot, nor herons either," I said. "I don't know why our tastes have varied so in recent years. In the old pictures of game for the monastery, a fat abbot is looking over trout, duck, bittern, and heron, so they evidently ate them in those days."

There was a fine school of heron fishing a shallow together in line. A couple of cormorants sat on a sandy bank and had opened out their wings to dry. A long-drawn whistle called attention to a grey curlew, which was probing the sand with its curved beak. Near it was a couple of black-and-white birds whose beaks curved upwards and not downwards. These avocets ran hither and thither on the flat, swinging from side to side their long slender bills, specially designed to sift insects in the liquid mud, and at each find they tossed their heads upward to let the edible morsel go down.

After spying round for a time I returned to my work. Some of it was dull enough, but even "the daily round, the common task" has humour if one has the eyes to look for it.

"You must excuse this long petition," wrote a man with a grievance, "but I am like a child that is only fed when it cries."

I read the quaint conceit out to Vernon, and we chuckled over it together.

"Geese at last," shouted Vernon, and we both grabbed guns and hurried to the prow to stop the rowers.

"They fly funnily," said Vernon doubtfully, as they came within range and we prepared to fire.

"They are cormorants," I cried, but too late.

Both of us fired before we could stop ourselves, and brought down a couple, which were recovered and made use of, the one by the boatmen and the other, unlawful for Mahommedans, by the sweeper, Wadhawa.

"This type of cormorant goes in flocks," I read out, the game book on my knee, "as opposed to the larger kind, which is solitary or in pairs." No wonder we were unprepared, but we ought to have noticed that they flew in line, and not in a V like the geese.

Nawab interfered to air his ornithological knowledge.

"These are crow-birds," he said, "and the others are petticoat-fowl."

He used the word by which natives describe the white soldiers of our Highland regiments, and certainly the pair we had just seen pirouetting with outstretched wings on the mud-bank had sufficient resemblance at a distance to the Punjabi women in the skirts which give the name to both.

"Now," said Vernon, pointing a little later at a

bunch of black-and-white birds of a size between duck and geese which swam in a shallow among some sand-banks, "what do you make those out to be?"

I peered at them, but confessed failure.

"Well," he continued, pleased at his own touch of superior knowledge, "I have never seen them myself except in the London parks, but I think they are called the common sheldrake."

"Own brother to the common sand-grouse, I expect," I said. "I have shot just one of those common birds in ten years' residence among the pintails and imperials of a sand-grouse country. Let's have a fling for a specimen of this 'common' kind."

We were off in the small boat in a few seconds, and, diverging into the side channel, tried to drift down on them.

"I hope they are not like brahminys," murmured Vernon as we got close. Ruddy sheldrakes, better known as brahminy ducks, are terrible sentinels to the more edible geese, and their common friends were not much less alert. However, they stopped just a second too long and we got the specimen we desired. Remembering the taste of the brahminy, we told Nawab to cut its throat for himself.

"What a beauty!" I said as we made our way back to the main boat. "Just look at the markings."

The bird with its bottle-green neck and red-knobbed beak, however common on ornamental lakes round London, was new to us, and we marked the chestnut band on its breast, and spread out the wings, the better to note the variegation of white, black, green, and brown.

We got back and settled down to our respective tables. Papers were disposed of and thrown into the office baskets at intervals, and each such interval was combined with a sweep of the glasses, but it was no good.

We saw the non-edible river birds here and there. A pair of fish-hawks drifted in file down the face of the water, the first crying, as is supposed, "Allah! Allah!" in the hope that the pious fish would come to the surface to join in the cry and be seized by the powerful talons and spiky feet of the second. A solitary specimen of the giant white heron stood flaunting its perfect whiteness in distant security. Terns of several kinds dipped and wheeled, especially haunting those portions of the bank which the river was eroding, and where the insects exposed had no choice between death by drowning and the interior of a voracious maw.

Once again we had a thrill of excitement.

Nawab, perched above the rudder, called out wildly, "Geese! geese!" but this time we were prepared for a false alarm, and the white cloud that he had seen flying over a network of mud-banks was too white even for bar-headed geese. It swept towards us, rising and falling curiously like a wave, and resolved itself into spoonbills with long curious beaks, black spotted and tipped with yellow, and flattened at the end like a physician's spatula.

They passed, and on we went, sometimes skirting a high bank covered with yellow reeds, or a wood of dwarf poplars; at others, passing among the shallows where nothing relieved the monotony of the stretches

of mud and sand. The barren hills that bounded the horizon on the west stood out in a strange pattern of jagged outlines against the sky. Their sides were scored and fissured by the rains which, coming seldom, fall with violence on the treeless slopes. To the east the horizon has no boundary, but the desert stretches away illimitable. The contrast on both sides with the green of the riverain brings out with emphasis that, in these arid parts, land alone is naught, and all depends on water.

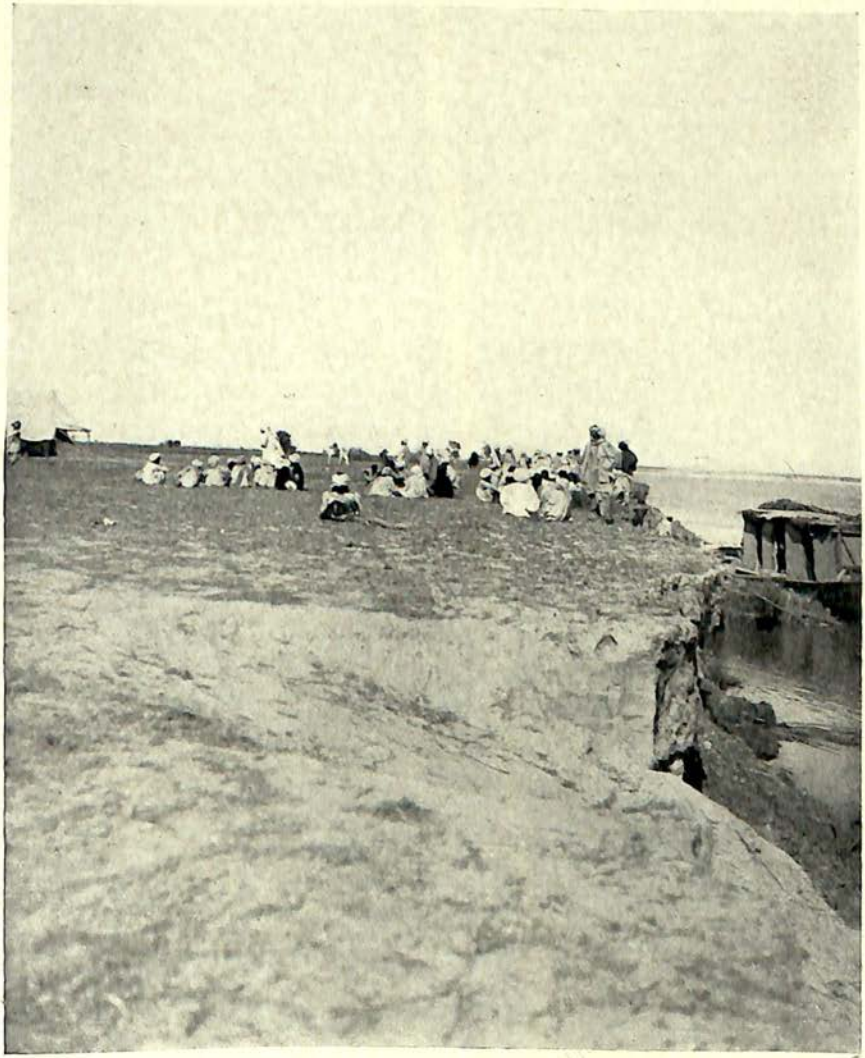
The boatmen took their cue from the shape of the river, letting the boat drift where the sharp current was bringing the bank down, but rowing hard where the sand-banks abounded to keep it in the narrow navigable way. Round and round bends we went, till at last we could see a group of natives awaiting us on a high firm bank. A bare dry place had been selected for the camp, but there were fine patches of cultivation lying between good strips of reed-jungle not too high to shoot in.

As we pulled to the shore I noted that Pir Ali Nur awaited us in the throng with his red-bearded brother. The saint, as a recipient of gifts, and by purchase out of public subscriptions, had acquired land in many areas, and was there as a territorial magnate.

"Well, Pir Sahib," I cried, after a hearty greeting, "I hope all is well. What is the news of the river?"

"What news can I give of the river, may Allah be pleased with my Lord. The river has killed us all."

Realising the cause of his sorrow, I asked, "Has the erosion, then, been very bad down here?"



The camp, boats, and litigants.

With the true delight of the farmer in recounting a misfortune, the Pir went on to explain in detail the distance the river had moved in the previous summer.

"That is not all, Sahib," he went on; "it is even now eating up that field down south which is covered with wheat."

"Never mind, Pir Sahib," I said consolingly; "if the river takes away here, it gives there."

"True, your Honour, but it takes away gold and gives tin. It will be long before that sand-bank on the other side will give me a wheat crop."

"Cheer up," I said, fully cognizant of his sources of wealth. "God will provide you with food."

The holy man smiled the comfortable smile of one whose eggs are not all in one basket.

"You are early, sir. I prayed that you might arrive early. My liver yearned for your arrival."

"Your prayers, Pir Sahib," interposed Vernon, "must have accounted for our getting no shooting. Should we be grateful for that? If we had had anything to shoot we should have arrived later."

"May my Lord live, that was why I prayed. I wished to see again your expert shooting of partridges. There are many here, and I have forbidden snaring since I heard this spot would be thus honoured."

"That is good of you," was my answer. "We will go out directly Mr Benson comes."

Miles and I settled down to work in our cabin again, waiting for the other party to arrive, but it was not till lunch-time that the tent boat appeared. Allah Baksh explained that the Doratta Sahib would not give up his tent for a long time.

"Bless the man!" said Vernon. "Isn't that like him? If they have had anything to shoot *en route* we shall miss the partridges."

However, as luck would have it, the other boat arrived at 3.30.

"Daddy has shot a crocodile," screamed Humpie to Vernon.

So he had, but Vernon's eyes were less on the long green beast lying across the front of the boat than on the roof where Vickers, in immaculate clothing, sat by Miss Barbara's side.

"I say, you fellows," he said as he descended, "the roof is my discovery. You are all right if you keep to the cross-spar."

"It certainly is the best place on the boat," agreed Miss Waynfleete. "One gets view and breeze, and a full sight of everything."

"That's all right," growled Benson, "for you people of leisure. We have to keep one eye on our papers, even if the other one is watching the river. Besides, one cannot aim on the top, the sight wobbles so."

"You are a Philistine, Benson, and have no soul for the joys of nature," said Vickers; "you want your brutal slaughter all the time."

"Well, there is one thing I may tell you," I said, "there was no mistaking that you were on the roof. We could see your white helmet gleaming from afar almost before the boat appeared."

"My goodness, yes!" said Benson. "I wondered why that gaggle of geese swung so clear of us, even though the oars had been stopped some time before. Where is your other hat?"

"What other hat?" replied Vickers, not at all pleased at our contempt at the latest fashionable shape in white material worn in the capitals, and named after the Viceroy of the day. "This is the hat I am accustomed to wear when in the company of ladies. I have brought no other."

"That must be set right," said Benson bluntly. "What is beautiful in one place serves as a scarecrow elsewhere, and we are not going to have our sport spoilt by a hat."

Miss Waynfleete intervened in her kindly manner.

"Perhaps I may be allowed to cover up its offending beauty with a green cover. I have a bit of material that will just do."

Vickers began to protest, but Benson jumped at the idea. "Yes, Barbara, please begin at once, so as to be ready for to-morrow. Vickers can wear his Homburg hat now after the partridges. It is more or less cool."

Vickers was mollified at the idea of wearing something sewn by her fair fingers, and began to be fulsome, but Barbara turned to tell Vernon about the capture of the crocodile. Humpie, holding his friend firmly by the hand, was hopping up and down gleefully, and describing with gusto how his father had slipped down in the mud whilst rushing forward to help to secure the brute.

"And they had to tie the crocodile's mouth up with lots and lots of ropes before they could get near him," he finished.

"The lots and lots being one noose cleverly slipped over the snapping jaws from behind," laughed the

girl. "Shall I tell Mr Vernon how somebody jumped with fright when the crocodile's tail flapped as they brought it on board?"

"Never mind, old man," said Vernon, patting the little head. "Aunts always tease; I won't listen if she does tell."

Vickers, who never seemed quite in his element with children, stood by looking bored, until Barbara, leaving Vernon and Humpie to amuse each other for the moment, began to chat to him again.

However, Benson and I soon dragged both the young men off to discuss the more serious business of dealing with the partridges.

Vickers might be a dilettante, and more interested in flirting than in shooting, but he was a fine enough shot, as we had seen at Shalwar, and he took his share with the partridges that afternoon.

The bag was curiously balanced. Nineteen grey partridges, nineteen black partridges, three hares, and three gadwall made just enough for a short afternoon's stroll. Benson and I kept Vickers between us and stood no nonsense from him, but made him keep his line. Altogether it was a good afternoon, though much too short for dealing with the abundant game, and we galloped back, pleasantly fatigued, and feeling very ready for a belated cup of tea.

"To-morrow," said Benson, "the tent question will be easily solved. Whilst the ladies get up at their leisure, we will do a bit of galloping for geese and crane and return in time for breakfast. These fields here are, the Pir tells me, famous for them."

As a matter of fact, we saw some flights going out

just then, but had not time to do more than mark their direction.

While we sat at tea in the verandah of the big tent we watched a new game which the infant Humphrey had, after observation of the habits on the river tour of his father and the rest of us grown-up men, invented for himself. First his bath, guiltless of water, was set out in the middle of the tent to represent the Dreadnought, and Humpie's teddy-bear, his rabbit, and other toy animals were disposed all around. The small boy himself then embarked, with a trusty gun of the best Lowther Arcade brand in his hand, and rowed steadily for a space with a walking-stick of his father's, keeping a watchful eye to right and left. Presently something seemed to attract his attention, and, ceasing his rowing, he stopped to peer through the circles of his chubby fingers, after the manner of a man using a pair of field-glasses. Then, sinking silently to the bottom of the bath, he took long and deadly aim, shouting the vernacular for "got him" at the detonation of the cap. Then he rode swiftly and collected the trophy from the place where it lay, a victim to his skill and cunning, on the bank, and triumphantly returned home. But all good things have to come to an end, and Mrs Benson presently said—

"Now I must have the boat to bathe you in, Humpie," and we all dispersed to our respective tents.

I was in my tent later, writing mail letters for home, and was suddenly surprised to hear Vickers' voice uplifted in loud terms of abuse.

Some light still remained, and I looked out through the reed verandah of my tent, which was close to that of Vickers. He was outside, and in front of him stood the dog-boy whom he had brought along with him to look after his little thoroughbred fox-terrier.

Something that the boy had done in regard to the dog's dinner had evidently displeased Vickers, who had been administering corporal punishment, as I could see from the fact that the boy was tearfully readjusting his puggaree.

"What's wrong?" I said, looking out.

This Vickers, angry and intolerant, taken at a disadvantage, and rather disinclined to allow interference with his affairs, was a totally different being from the suave individual the ladies found him, and I wondered how Miss Barbara would approve of the change. He did not receive my suggestion that the ladies' tents were near enough for the noise to reach them any too graciously.

"These niggers try one beyond endurance sometimes," he said intolerantly.

"However, personally, I don't approve of striking native servants," I replied. "You wouldn't do it with an Englishman."

"Oh, a white man's different," he rejoined. "The black man always grovels, and it is his own fault if you sometimes yield to the temptation of kicking him. The white man stands up to you, and you don't want to hit him."

"The most unconvincing argument you could possibly have put forward," I said, returning to my tent

in disgust, and wondering if Miss Barbara had seen or heard anything of the episode.

Probably Vickers, once his temper had cooled, felt anxious on this score himself, and at dinner-time and after he certainly spared no pains to make himself charming to the young lady. I fancied that she greeted him with a slightly heightened colour as we went in to the meal, but of course many things might have accounted for that, and no reference was made to the incident by any one. Indeed all the talk was of the coming native festivities, Barbara's excitement being greatly damped when she was told that it was highly improbable that the bride would be visible even to the ladies of the party.

CHAPTER XVIII.

SHARU KHAN'S STORY.

WHEN I turned out early next morning I was astonished to find Vickers pacing about with Vernon in front of the tents. The pair were talking, but the look on Vernon's face was not as friendly as his forced conversation.

"Hullo! Vickers," I said, "this is a surprise. I never expected you."

"Oh, you backwoodsmen go to bed so beastly early that my sleep was finished and I had to wake," was his explanation.

"Well," I said, "this alters matters. We shall have to divide forces. Geese and cranes can be driven over three so as to give every one some sort of a chance, but if we go four some must have a dull time."

I was moving off to chat with our native friends, who had come out to assist us, when I suddenly saw our grooms in a bunch, waiting together to lead up our horses. Amongst them was the English pony with a side-saddle on.

Sure enough Benson emerged, shouting "Barbara,

are you ready? Neither we nor the cranes wait for lazy girls."

But Miss Waynfleete was ready and came out, bright and radiant in the crisp morning air. I had a discussion with Benson on the readjustment of plans.

"Barbara wants to see how we shoot these bigger birds. You had better keep her with your party. Yes, and take Vickers too, as she happens to be on his nag. That is the only fair thing to do. I'll take Vernon."

I smiled to myself at the thought that Benson, like most other men, infinitely preferred my lad to Vickers as a shooting companion, good shot as the latter was. Indeed, had it not been for the compensation of Miss Barbara's charming company I should have found the exchange anything but pleasing.

Pir Ali Nur, despite his age and dignity, insisted on placing himself in command of our party, and Vickers and I accordingly rode south with Barbara, while the others with Fazl Hak of the auburn dyes went north.

The sun was just rising, its red disk creeping slowly out of the distant sand-hills. As it grew in size I called the girl's attention to its appearance and to the reflections in the water.

"What a queer shape it has taken now," she said, as the golden orb broadened in the refraction to an ellipse for a moment just before it rose clear. "And how perfect the sky and water look with that lovely pink light reflected back."

"The scenery on a morning's ride in such company

is certainly beautiful," said Vickers, pointing his remark with a look of intense admiration. "Were it always thus I should be up early every day, but this is a dull and uninteresting country as a rule."

Miss Waynfleete evaded the suggestion, and rode on without further comment, her eyes turned away towards the water.

"What is that long thin line over there above those sand-banks?" she cried presently. "It looks like a cloud or a patch of river mist, but all else is perfectly clear."

"That's grand," I answered. "You have good eyes. Here come the cranes."

The thin line came nearer and resolved itself into a large number of dots, which gradually, on closer view, became Demoiselle Cranes, calling loudly one to the other. They passed a few hundred yards from us, and drifted low over the tamarisks and reeds, scorning the smaller fields of pulse, which might have placed them within touch of danger.

"Come along," I cried, breaking into a trot. "They won't go very far, but we had better keep them in sight."

The calls doubled and redoubled as the leaders made a wheel and counter-wheel, and, after much discussion and argument, the flight settled down on to a great field of gram that lay between two belts of reeds and stretched on far away from the river.

"If those were geese," I said to Vickers, "we could walk alongside a pony, and drop by those two lone tamarisks over there, but cranes would not let the horseman come so near."

We had a consultation with the Pir Sahib, keeping on the move all the time to divert suspicion. Finally we left the main party behind, Miss Waynfleete in charge of the Pir, while we and two horsemen made a detour of about a mile.

"If we can make behind that brake of reeds," I said to Vickers as we dismounted, "and crawl to the farthest limit possible, we may be near enough if they fly well on being put up. Can you crawl? The brutes will go at the first sight of a movement."

Vickers nodded, and we left our ponies, and walked behind one rider till we were at the reed clump we wanted. We squatted, while the rider went on and took up a position to serve as a stop on the side away from the man who was holding our horses. We moved forward to the nearer edge of our cover and then separated.

I was on the left, and crept along in a stooping position for some time; then I caught a glimpse of grey and black forms in front and dropped on to my knees. I crawled along some bushes farther, but suddenly saw the cold red eye of a sentinel bird fixed apparently in my direction. I ceased to move, and it grazed again.

Once more I went forward, this time on my stomach, but the bushes got thinner and thinner, and I feared to move any more lest the flight should take alarm and neither of us get a shot.

Directed by the Pir, our companions approached slowly in a semicircle, and, as the cranes got up, the riders on the wings galloped forward to keep them on the line. They drifted away from my side, however,

and I was just on the point of "snatching at the turban of the departing thief," as the native proverb has it, by firing at a long chance, when two shots went off from the right of the jungle well to my front. Two birds fell, and the rest swung away with much clamour.

"Right and left, by Jingo, that's good!" I cried, and went off to join Vickers.

For an apparent trifler he had managed his crawl extraordinarily well, and was almost within shot of the wary brutes before they rose.

Our flight swept away into the distance, and, if they had not, it would have been no use attempting to circumvent the crafty birds a second time. However, two more flights, disturbed by the shots, rose from some fields in the distance and moved to fresh pastures.

While we waited for our horses to reach us, we stood watching the line that the largest flock chose to take. Once mounted we went off at a full canter, and, spotting our quarry, settled on two isolated bushes, eighty yards or so apart, which alone gave any prospect of success.

The Pir Sahib managed the drive again in perfect fashion, and for the second time Vickers got his right and left, while I was left out of luck. I must admit that I was a little peevish. Of course it was all chance, but why should not chance have favoured me?

The Pir and Miss Barbara rode up to offer me their condolences before going on to congratulate Vickers.

"Shoe-beatings on the heads of those birds of

evil intentions! I tried my best to drive them to your Honour," said the amiable saint.

Laughing, I turned to Miss Waynfleete.

"The worst of all these occasions is, that one's native companions will always attempt to make the man of highest dignity get the best sport, but fortunately cranes are no respecters of persons. Let us go over and congratulate the successful sportsman."

We went across to Vickers, and found him pulling out the white ear-tufts from the heads of the birds which lay beside him. As we came up he deftly twisted a wisp of reed round the dainty bunch and presented it to the lady as a trophy of the chase. This was a pleasing little attention which I fear would have quite escaped Miles' ingenuity in like case, but at least he would have spared the young lady the accompanying flow of broad flattery for which Vickers was never at a loss. I wondered at a sensible girl having the patience to listen civilly to such balderdash. She did not need to be told over and over again of her charm and attractiveness.

However, a man never quite understands what will please or displease a woman.

Vickers' bag having been safely collected, we all mounted, and a brisk canter brought us back to camp, where we started breakfast in the boat without waiting for the others.

"It is impossible to pay polite attentions on shooting days," said Mrs Benson. "I shan't forget my first experience when I waited nobly till twelve for my breakfast, and then got a severe scolding from Dick for my folly."

Vernon and Benson clattered in as we were finishing our meal, bringing with them a nice mixed bag—a grey goose, two bar-heads, three thick-knees with goggle eyes, eight pigeon, and six pintailed sand-grouse. Of course we had to hear exactly how they were got, while Vickers' two right and lefts received the necessary applause.

Humpie, as in duty bound for the son of a sportsman, was made to go over the spoil. Geese, pigeon, and sand-grouse he knew already, but the cranes and stone-plover puzzled him greatly.

Meanwhile the word had been given to cast off, and we proceeded slowly down stream with the Bensons' boat close at hand. We had been on the move some time, when suddenly Vernon, looking through the glasses, said, "We can't resist those. Who is for a blaze at geese?"

"Where? where?" was our excited reply.

A fine flock of bar-headed geese could be seen some distance down stream, grazing on the small shoots of tamarisk in the ooze of a depression separated from the river by a stretch of sand. The small boats were called for, and we loaded them up with guns, rifles, and cartridge-bags.

In the excitement of the moment no one noticed that Vickers was sitting calm and unconcerned.

"Aren't you going, Mr Vickers?" asked Miss Barbara.

"No," he replied; "I have done my day's work, and prefer my present company to that of geese on a mud-flat."

"I don't shoot," she replied, "but if I did, I think

a successful morning would make me greedy for more, instead of content with my triumph."

How Vickers received this remark I don't know, because just then we started off.

As the smallest, I was put in the canvas boat and sent to the top of the flats. Benson and Vernon in the Dreadnought drifted down stream, and, rounding a bend, tied up to a firm bank well below the birds.

They scrambled out, and, edging forward, distributed themselves as best they could on the river side of the flats. The cover was almost *nil*, but Benson found a heap of brushwood with a dip, behind which he lay to the detriment of his clothing. All Vernon could discover for himself was a depression with a moderate bank, behind which he squatted, but the ooze in it necessitated his shifting, crab-like, from side to side to prevent getting stuck fast.

Though I was always impetuous by nature I have had to learn the virtue of patience in Hazratabad. At last I saw that the others had found their position, and, creeping on to the flat, I proceeded with bent back and crooked knees towards a depression on the land side of that in which the geese were grazing. I arrived all right at the position which placed the geese between me and my friends, but I did not wish to let the others alone have the glory. A little more bent-back work and I could see the two black bars on the white foreheads. The bar-headed goose is more of a simpleton than his grey congener, so I had hopes.

Sinking lengthwise I grovelled forward, keeping

a few minute bushes between me and some of the birds. At last I was within range, but, alas! the bending and the grovelling had broken my patience, and instead of persisting a little longer and sitting up slowly, I scrambled to my knees and had a couple of hurried bangs.

A shower of white feathers from a dilapidated tail did not cheer me. Nothing was left but to see what the flight did. I got up to my full height to discourage their return, but the gaggle was not concerned with me, and drifted very low past the harmless piece of brushwood.

Benson timed his rise most cleverly, and raked the leaders when level, and had a second slap at an individual bird. Flop! flop! and four were down.

The flight swerved and should have gone near Vernon, but, just at the critical moment, the bog claimed his right leg, and the jerks that he made to save his boot *minus* a heel made the clanging rascals swerve away.

However, we had all been schooled for disappointments, and, at least, all the errors were our own. We thus joined Benson in the collection of his four fine birds, and went back to the boat.

Little Mrs Benson's eyes gleamed when she heard that her husband had accounted for all the spoil. His disclaimer that it was all due to my careful driving, and my objection that fate might have equally taken them over Vernon, passed unnoticed. Whatever successes her husband had obtained were successes for her.

Vickers had induced Miss Waynfleete to sit on the roof with him and watch our manœuvres, and on our return delivered himself of some cheap satire on the joys of goose-stalking as evidenced by our wet and mud-stained appearance.

"Your energy compels my admiration," he said, addressing us all at large, but with his remarks evidently intended to impress the young lady, "but it does not inspire me to follow your example. A poaching crawl in rich mud is not my idea of shooting. Give me a grouse-drive, or a walk up for snipe or partridge with the birds sufficiently plentiful, and time for a cigar occasionally."

Although we had, as a party, brought back enough to justify our mud-larking, my own day had been completely blank. It was therefore not surprising that my reply had a note of asperity in it. Moods do vary so immensely with the result of sport.

"Wise men take what they can get," I said, "instead of talking about what is not there to get. Anyway, the result is the thing, and here we are with four more geese."

"Yes, indeed," interposed Mrs Benson, "and no one pities me in my dilemma as to what to do with all these great birds. There are seven geese and four cranes already."

"One has had its throat cut, and can be given to one of the gentry," said Benson, "but that still leaves you with ten. It is no use attempting to send any away to Sialgarh from this distance."

"Never mind," was the reply of the careful housewife. "I will make potted-meat for you. I think,

Mr Travers, you approved of my potted-partridge and ham once before."

The boat had by this time got into motion down the sluggish winter channel of the Indus and lunch was announced, a welcome sound to the hungry hunters. There was little room to spare in the cabin when we were all in it, full as it was with rifles, guns, and cartridges, while at least two pairs of binoculars lay ready to hand on the table.

The fish had hardly been consumed amidst all the perils of the forked bones of which so many of our Indian fish are full, when Vernon jumped from his place with a very perfunctory apology, seized my rifle and a cartridge, and fired out of the doorway.

"What on earth are you at?" I exclaimed, as the unhappy Mamdu, bringing in a dish of teal in one hand and the potato dish in the other, nearly encountered disaster.

But Vernon was reloading too hastily to even see him.

"*Got him,*" he said to us, and then to the boatman, "Pull to shore, oh sons of heroes. One does not take a chance like that every time, even if one gets it."

The cause of his elation was clear enough.

A baby crocodile not two feet long, standing one and a half inch high, had been drilled by a bullet one-third of an inch thick.

"Oh, the poor baby thing!" cried Miss Barbara. "I am surprised, Mr Vernon, at your taking advantage of such youth and innocence."

However, her first horror of slaughter was evidently fast wearing off, for she was quite enthusiastic over Vernon's shot, which, considering the size of the target and the distance, was certainly no bad one.

We finished our meal without further excitement. Though the rest of the afternoon was quite uneventful, it was very delightful as we swept on gently down the stream. Above was a clear blue sky, west of us the purple hills with a brisk breeze blowing from them in our faces, and all about the russet and green of tamarisk and poplar. The lazy pulsing of the great oars seemed a fitting accompaniment to the feelings of contentment engendered by successful sport.

We got into camp quite late in the evening, and, as we had had tea on board, there seemed nothing to do but stroll along the bank as a digestive before dinner.

This camp was in Benson's territory, and I did not know the gentry of that part. However, such a number of our own friends had travelled down towards the marriage festivities on boats of their own, or with our tents or with the clerks, that there were several to greet.

This over, Mrs Benson walked her husband off, and Miss Barbara, for reasons of her own, claimed my company. If her intention, however, was to escape her admirers, it was defeated, since both insisted on accompanying us.

We had crossed the mouth of an inundation canal, high and dry then, but carrying a four-foot flow in the

summer season, when a curious cry brought us to a standstill.

"That is a puzzler! What would you make it, Vickers?" I asked.

Vickers disclaimed knowledge of the cries of the wilds, but Vernon suggested that it was an otter.

"That's it," I said, and looking down the bank some fifty yards ahead we saw a shiny long body slipping in and out of the water.

It did not move away as we went closer, but remained running in and out and crying sadly.

"Poor thing!" said our fair companion. "It is tied to a stake; why is this?"

Sharu Khan, Lishari, and Ghulamu, Hinjrà, had come along as natives will do — sometimes too officiously—to see that all went well with us.

"That is to catch porpoises with," said Ghulamu. "The porpoise is enamoured of the otter, and thus the Kehals spear them."

"What rot is he talking?" said Vickers.

"He is only saying what every countryman, not of the fishing tribes, believes in these parts," was my reply. "Actually, Vernon and I have once watched the process."

"Yes, Miss Waynfleete," put in Miles, "the Kehals sit on a little platform over a shallow, with some fish secured in the water below them. The otter cries for the fish, and the porpoises, knowing that there must be fish around, come rolling up."

"And as they dash for the fish they get harpooned from the platform by the Kehals," I went on. "Here are some of this curious tribe."

There was a small reed-hut set in the side of the jungle, and just then a dishevelled female with a minimum of ragged clothing and her back hair visible, contrary to all the tenets of Eastern respectability, came out carrying some horrible mess, which she threw down on the bank as food for the wailing otter.

The other inmates of the hut had evidently caught sight of us and flocked out. There were an aged beldame, several young women, a number of small children absolutely unclothed, a larger lad with a non-comprehensive shirt, and a tottery old man who came forward to do the talking. However, what with the absence of his teeth and the fact that his language was a variant of the various dialects of the Indus riverain, he was difficult to understand. Fortunately, with the aid of Sharu Khan and Ghulamu we managed to establish some sort of understanding.

"Do you see what they are cooking, Miss Waynfleete?" I said. "It is crocodile to eat. Would you like a taste?"

There was a mass of white flesh sizzling in the pot, and Sharu Khan pointed out the long shreds of meat drying in strips all round the reed-shelter which was an appanage to the hut.

"I should not like it at all," she replied. "But, do you see, the skin is on too. Fancy having jaws to tackle such crackling as that!"

"The poor will eat anything," I replied, and, turning to the old man, I asked if it tasted well.

The dark aboriginal grinned.

"May I be your sacrifice, we think it tastes much better than mutton."

"Are you Mahommedans?" asked Vernon.

"In the name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful, we are indeed."

"Then why," growled Ghulamu, with the intolerance of the orthodox, "do you eat these river monsters?"

"What do we know, oh, Great One?" was the humble reply. "Our saint is Imam Ṣhafi, who enjoined that all animals of the river are lawful food."

I turned to discuss with Vernon the four schools of Islam, and the curiosity of finding among the general mass of Hanifis this little party of a sect which has its headquarters in Northern Africa and Arabia.

"They have taken a great teacher and made him a semi-divine Pir," I said. "It is just like the Mahommedan sweepers, whose spiritual guide was a well-known Hindu poet, author of the great epic, the Ramayana."

But it is difficult to talk on serious subjects with a man in love, and Vernon escaped from me to join the pair who had moved off to look at the otter more closely.

I informed the old Kehal that there was the flesh of Vernon's baby crocodile in the camp to be had for the asking, and he was delighted.

"Where are your young men? Are they catching fish?"

"No, they are putting up your Honour's camp."

That was a set-back, so telling the old man to arrange for the fetching of the meat, we moved off.

I could neither ride off Vickers, nor did I wish to monopolise Vernon, so I chatted as we went along with Sharu and Ghulamu.

"Are you invited to the wedding, Sharu Khan?" I asked.

"Yes," he replied innocently. "I have always been a friend of one of the Sirdar's headmen."

Ghulamu's eye had just a faint twinkle in it, and I decided to inquire from Benson the antecedents and character of this excellent headman of his. The "rope" of cattle thieves stretches far, and has many most respectable strands in it.

However, Sharu Khan had all the time been edging up to Vernon. He was evidently looking for an opportunity to speak to him, but was somewhat embarrassed by the presence of Barbara and Vickers. At last he could contain himself no longer.

"Those were great doings of yours, your Honour," he burst out. "I have been waiting to congratulate you for ever so long. God be praised! You have great courage."

Barbara now understood enough even of the lingo Sharu Khan spoke to be able to understand this, and her curiosity was aroused both by the enthusiastic tone of the native's words and by the evident discomfort with which Miles received them.

"What doings, Mr Vernon?" she asked, with what seemed to me a world of kindly interest.

Something in her tone struck Vickers, who looked up in jealous surprise.

"You'll have to come to me, Miss Waynfleete," I interposed before Miles could enter any disclaimer, "if you want anything like the story. Sharu Khan is right. It was a very plucky thing."

And I told her the tale as it deserved to be told.

"*Splendid*," said the girl softly, looking straight before her.

I had longed for some time to tell the Benson party of Miles' plucky behaviour with the two ruffians in the desert, and yet I knew him well enough to know that he would be furious if I did so. I was therefore very glad of the chance that had arisen naturally.

My notion that his exploit had made an impression on Miss Waynfleete was confirmed when, at dinner, Benson asked me about the episode, as he and his wife could only have heard of it through her.

Dick was full of enthusiasm. "Top hole, Vernon," he said. "*Sic itur.*"

Miles looked more uncomfortable than ever with the nervousness of the Englishman found out in good deeds.

"It wasn't much of a show," he stammered, "but they were a quaint couple. I must show you the pistol-case of one of them. The Balochis across the border have a fine skill in silk embroidery on leather which you don't see elsewhere."

His discomfort was so obvious that I felt myself called upon to play conductor for the lightning I myself had summoned.

"Moulwi Abdul Karim's definition of courage," I interpolated, "is a combination of equal parts of folly and shame: shame lest, if you run away, the people at home will laugh at you; and folly, because, in trying to kill others, you run the risk of being killed yourself."

And the laugh that followed served to turn the conversation off Miles' exploit.

CHAPTER XIX.

A WEDDING FEAST.

THERE was nothing to shoot in the neighbourhood of camp next morning, and it was equally hopeless to expect the ladies to be up and out early with Humpie.

I woke before the dawn, as I usually do in the camping season, to hear the whee! whee! whee! of the large stone-plover resounding as it had done the best part of the night. These birds are poor eating even when curried, but one cannot help shooting at them for their similitude to their smaller relatives the lesser stone-plover, which are almost as good in the pot as those other birds of the same toe-marks, the florikan.

After a time other birds took up the calls.

I could hear the plover's note, the long-drawn whistle of the curlew, and the harsh cries of the ospreys early out for food. Brahminy ducks chuckled in single tones of undisturbed contentment, so different from the nasty notes which mark their anxiety at intruders. The honk! honk! of geese made me leap up from my bed and peer across the water, now tinged with the rosy streaks of sunrise, but the

flight kept to the centre of the stream, so I returned shivering to the blankets.

The minor birds woke up.

Redshanks flitted about crying too! too! too! Greenshanks answered with a piping chee-weet! Kurr! kurr! unmistakably marked the presence of some pochard, and I could just hear the cackle of a group of mallard—so near and yet so far.

The proximity of all these birds drove me to get up, though I knew that they were in security, and that their shooting-grounds were distant. Once I was dressed, there was nothing for me to do but to move across to our boat and to let the tent-pitchers get on with the demolition.

The wind grew in strength with the sun, and I was glad to let down the curtains which, borrowed from the tents, hung on both sides of the boat doorways, and to light a lamp to work by. Vernon soon followed me, and, after an exchange of salutations, disappeared into the next cabin.

At nine the servants laid the breakfast-table, and called round at the remaining tents to announce the meal.

"What a day!" I said to Benson, as he entered the boat wearing an Afghan sheepskin overcoat. "Shall we be able to start?"

"We must try," he replied. "This is only a two hours' trip, but we have to be in for the marriage festivities and must not be late. Ghulam Haider wanted me to camp for two or three days, but I knew you had to get back from Kot Khatta, and cut him down to the one afternoon. We shall have

quite enough excitement in the time, but we don't want it prolonged. The noise and fuss of these entertainments are very trying."

One by one the rest of our party appeared, and breakfast progressed. When the meal was finally finished, we went out to take counsel with the boatmen.

The skipper, owner of a large cavernous upper jaw and a receding chin, was known to triflers like Nawab as *Khaga*, the Cat-fish.

"We cannot go in wind like this," he said.

Nawab jeered at him for a coward, but I turned to Sharu Khan, who, to avoid the blinding dust, was enveloped in a white sheet, which, wrapped round his nose and mouth, left only his eyes visible.

"Wait a bit till the turn of the sun and the wind will abate," he suggested.

We did wait for a time, but by eleven we were all very impatient. The tent boat had got off, and was making fair way down-stream.

"Well, if that boat can go I don't see why we can't," said Vickers.

I knew there was a difference in resistance between the tent boat which was loaded level and our hutted structures, but gave the word to start.

There was a mild protest from a junior boatman with a small heart.

"We will die," he said, in the hyperbolic phrase of his kind.

"There is no objection to your dying," I responded pleasantly, "but you must make a start."

After that the boatmen took the order as most

Orientals take orders, and obeyed without further comment. It may have been, and indeed it was, a wrong order, but it was the word of authority.

We started off, the oarsmen pulling for all they were worth. They appeared to be rowing up-stream, but this they were doing to fight the wind. Gradually, however, we were forced back on to the bank.

"Oh!" cried Mrs Benson nervously, "we can't go on like this."

"Let the men have a try," said her husband. "We have started now and can't go back."

We proceeded in a curious fashion, now stern, now prow, forward, but generally hitting the bank after every few yards. One of the hapless boatmen, who had jumped ashore the better to fend off the boat, was nearly skewered with his own fending pole, when the wind, gaining strength, pressed the boat relentlessly towards the bank. All but this one man realised the danger and gave way; but he only escaped by squirming sideways, with the loss of much skin, while his pole went deep into the soft sand.

Once clear again, we went back to our places in the crowded cabin where we sat talking. It was hopeless for the Bensons to attempt to get back in the little boat to their own vessel, which was proceeding in similar fashion some distance behind us. We had, therefore to amuse ourselves as best we might.

"Miss Waynfleete," said Vernon, "shall I show you the poem a local bard wrote to commemorate Travers' return to the district after leave, just about the time I joined it? It has some quaint touches."

"Oh do, please," she said, and, taking up the paper which Vernon handed to her, she read out—

"Our hearts were scarred like the tulip at your departure, and the pupils of our eyes were the candles of the vigil of your absence. But now you have returned, and our life is even as a sojourn in a garden. Our theme is the stalwart Oak that has borne the storm and stress of several years; our song is of the Jasmine bush that has lately been set in our midst."

"You don't mean to say that you are the Oak, Mr Travers?" she broke off, convulsed with merriment, "and Mr Vernon the Jasmine?"

"I can't imagine why you people allow such rubbish to be read out at you," exclaimed Vickers. "Fancy the weasel as a stalwart Oak!"

I was just going to reply that, if people like to do these things, one must listen, just as notables in England have to hear much adulatory verbiage from provincial mayors and the like, when——

A crash came, and the whole boat shivered with the impact.

We looked out to find that, as we swung on impotently from point to point, we had been driven on to a wheat-laden boat bound for the market at Sukkur, which was sensibly tied up to the bank.

"You have us destroyed," wailed the old wife of the skipper of the cargo boat, her front hair dyed red like the beard of her lord who stood beside her on the poop.

"Not at all; God has pitied you," cried Nawab. And this was true, because the country craft are not

In luck; a friendly wind.

built to resist shocks, but go to pieces very quickly. In this case, luckily, no damage had been done.

"Hadn't we better tie up?" suggested Mrs Benson, again somewhat anxiously.

But the Cat-fish, on being consulted, said that all would be well once we got round the next bend. This getting round was a great tussle, however, especially where the high bank disappeared, and we had to manœuvre to keep off the shallows and the mud-flats; but at last we passed the bend, and the wind could, for a time, only send us on our course.

What was our poison was other men's meat, and five boats in succession passed us, driving up-stream with their huge square sails roaring and threshing in the wind like Spanish galleons.

"They are in luck," remarked Benson. "Towing these cumbrous crafts is heavy work, especially when the men have to wade in the shallows half the time."

"Yes, indeed. They must have come a long distance since the wind rose," I rejoined. "There were some on the move all through the night."

"That must have been the extraordinary swishing sound I heard in the night," said Miss Barbara. "It woke me up, and I wondered whatever it could be. However, as my imagination is in good order, I decided it was nothing alarming, and went straight off to sleep again."

Noon came, and with it calm, as Sharu Khan had foretold. The tired boatmen were able to let the boat drift, trusting to the helmsman with his two-poled rudder to keep it straight.

We passed more than one unhappy boat well laden

with goods, which had been driven remorselessly on to sand-banks, and we thanked our stars that we were not in similar plight. All the same, we were getting a little bored with inanition and no sport, and were quite in sympathy with Humpie, who cried out—

"Oh, do shoot! Shoot something—shoot a camel."

However, few days in Hazratabad were ever completely blank, and even this morning was not to end without result.

"What is that big white thing out on the river?" said Barbara suddenly.

"Where?" asked Vernon, taking up his glasses. "Why, by Jove, yes. It's a pelican. You have got eyes, Miss Waynfleete. Who's coming?"

"Not for me, young man," I said. "I have got behind with my vernacular work. But you must shoot it for the servants. They'll tell you that you can make a wonderful liniment out of the fat, with properties so searching that if you rub it in the palm of your hand it'll come out at the back."

"Will you come, Benson?" asked Vernon.

"No, my lad," said Benson. "I am not going to have Travers jeering at me for a slacker, going out shooting while he is working."

"Well, will you come, Miss Waynfleete?" asked Miles quietly. "You spotted the bird. The Dreadnought is quite safe, even if you can't swim, which I expect you can."

"Yes, go along, Barbara," said Mrs Benson. "I'd love to come if I hadn't a letter to finish."

Barbara laughingly agreed. "I can swim," she said, "but I don't want to. Come on, Mr Vernon."

Out of luck; towing up-stream.

The urchin in charge of the small boat was summoned, and Vernon handed Miss Waynfleete in, suddenly producing a cushion or two for her comfort.

We had made out that we were going to work, but actually we watched their operations from the top of the boat through our glasses.

Evidently the great bird was asleep, for we saw the little boat get up almost to within shot range before his head was lifted. He then started swimming, but Miles gave him the first barrel of his twelve-bore. The pelican rose, but dropped to Miles' second barrel. He was only winged, for we saw the small boy rowing as hard as possible, while the great bird swam desperately away.

"I'll have a bet on the pelican against the small boy with you, Travers," said Benson to me. "The bird can swim much faster than the lad can row."

"I don't know about the boy, but I'll back Miles against the bird now," was my reply. "There goes his Winchester."

Before the sharp crack of the rifle reached us we saw the great bird heel over, with its huge wings outspread, like a yacht in a squall.

Miss Barbara was full of excitement when they returned with the bird.

"He *is* handsome, isn't he?" she said, triumphantly showing off the splendid crested pelican, with its delicate feathers tinged with rose, its beautiful white hackle, and the orange pouch under the great bill.

I tried to think that she had the air of identifying herself with Vernon's success, but after all it was only natural that she should be excited.

The servants were overjoyed, Nawab immediately undertaking the task of skinning the bird and preserving its valuable fat.

"Do you know, Nawab," I asked, "how to make the famous liniment?"

"I do not," was the reply, "but I will keep the fat till I meet some one who does."

"Well, Humpie," said Vernon, "if I did not shoot a camel I did shoot you something big."

"Yes, vewy, vewy big," murmured Humpie abstractedly. "You'll always go shooting with Mr Vernon now, won't you, Auntie Barbara?"

Barbara's face was turned away from me, but of course poor Miles blushed like a boy.

Shortly after lunch was over we came in sight of our landing-stage.

The line of horsemen drawn up at five-yard intervals along the bank made a brave show. They closed ranks as we approached and formed up behind their Chief, who, this time neither drugged nor prepared for sport, stood under a triumphal arch, a commanding figure in his voluminous robes of snowy white.

"May the day be auspicious, Sirdar Sahib," said Benson as the Chief advanced to greet us, and we all echoed the hope that the marriage would be a success.

"How would it not be auspicious," was the reply, "when it has been thus honoured by the presence of the great?"

"Hullo! here is the Maulwi Sahib," said Vernon, spotting our genial Judge from Doratta.

Maulwi Abdul Karim, with many smiles, shook hands all round.

"You like the arch?" he said in a tone of pride. "Here the people are fools. They are damn" (we had noted before that the Maulwi uses the latter expletive like an adjective). "They have no education. But the Chief, who is my friend, said to me, 'Maulwi Sahib, you are clever man and English scholar; I leave the mottoes to you.'"

Now Abdul Karim and I are, and I hope always will be, friends, but it is hard if a man calls attention proudly to such legends as—

"Long live Mr Benson!"

"God help Mrs Benson!"

It was with difficulty that we saved the worthy man's feelings by inventing some other object on which to work off the mirth which, for all our efforts, demanded expression.

The Chief made us all look at his racing mares, carefully covered in heavy felts, and then informed us that the sports would begin in half an hour.

There was an interval for the usual round of calls from the Chief and other leading men, and then we were escorted to the racecourse.

The site of our camp had been cunningly chosen at a place where the bank was high and old, and where a large expanse of grassy plain lay, backed by open cultivated fields and small patches of reed thickets.

An old and tattered marquee, long since condemned from the Government stores, had been pitched on

the grass, and served at least the purpose of keeping the sun off.

We took our seats and prepared to watch.

The squires and squireens found places near us, interspersed democratically, as is so usually the case, with many of their tag-rag and bobtail followers. We saw Mallik Massu waddle up a little late and out of breath. He embraced the Sirdar, not on each cheek in Continental fashion, but by pressing him breast to breast both on right and left sides. This over, he settled down outside one corner of the marquee.

At this moment the string-band struck up, and we all turned to admire the musicians, who were hereditary bards of the Rind tribe. There were four tall bearded men in loose smocks and baggy trousers, with well-oiled ringlets hanging forward on their chests. They all had similar instruments, half guitar and half fiddle, variously patterned and decorated according to the individual taste of the owner. They scraped away, not unmusically, while the first item of our programme was run through.

This was a camel-race, once round the course of a mile and a quarter.

The queer gaunt creatures, cantering with ungainly bounds at the start, made us all laugh immensely. The race was not to the canterers, however, but to a fast Bikaniri trotter, which maintained the same pace throughout, and passed the others as they grew leg-weary. The picture it made stalking in with giant strides delighted us, and Humpie almost wept in his eagerness to go for a similar ride.

"Where on earth did these pantomime artistes

A string band.

come from?" called out Vickers. "Here's music for you, if you like."

A gourd-band was marching down the ranks of the spectators to join the string-band in making music for our delectation. They certainly were a quaint party.

Two of them played on twin crossed reeds, two more blew down flutes with bellies of gourd, while the fifth beat a pumpkin combination of drum and tambourine. They squatted down near us with the others, and sang in a local dialect in a curious jerky manner.

Then followed the donkey race, which was confined to Mahommedans of the lower classes, such as potters and cobblers, and to Hindus, who, in these parts, owing to centuries of oppression, have a lower status.

With feet well locked under the diminutive animals' bellies, a score or so set out round a long course. Donkeys are perverse animals, and few of these had been raced before. Many were the mishaps and wanderings from the course, which all helped to amuse both ourselves and the other spectators.

Only three, two Mahommedan lads and a Hindu, were left in as they came round the last rather sharp bend for home. A sporting Baloch hastened to assist the Hindu by bringing a stick down heavily on the flank of his unhappy animal, but this illicit interference did not help the shopkeeper's son to victory. The little ass recorded his protest by stopping dead, and sending his rider over his head by a well-timed buck.

"Wah! wah!" roared the crowd, as it surged

delightedly over the course, to be dispersed with the utmost difficulty by the retainers of the Chief.

Wild cries of "They're off! they're off!" were next heard, and the flight of the last passive resisters from the course informed us that the first of the horse races had started.

For a country which thinks that four miles is a good distance to gallop, this race, a little more than once round the course, was a mere scurry.

Past us tore the mares, their riders sitting bare-backed, flogging and flourishing from the start. Most of them carried two sticks, one of them held between the teeth in case the other should get worn out. Not knowing the form of the animals, and there being no book-makers present to cry the respective odds, it was difficult to get wildly excited as to the result. However, a grey came in easily a winner by three lengths, but there was a great struggle between two chestnuts and a bay for the next places.

The judges said their say, but the riders were by no means satisfied.

"Say I was only fourth, indeed!" said the rider of the bay indignantly. "*Look at that.* Could a man ride like that and not be second, let alone third?" And before he could be hustled away, he showed a thigh, the inside of which had been skinned by his zealous equitation.

A foot-race intervened.

We speculated, as the men drew up, on the possible winner, but who has ever really discovered what make and shape it is that produces a runner?

"Would the ladies like to hear some Balochi love

The troubadours.

sonnets?" said Maulwi Abdul Karim, as the men were despatched to run round the same long course. "The Chief wishes me to ask."

"Yes, indeed, we should," said both the ladies. "That would be interesting."

"But are there any love-affairs among these people?" added Miss Barbara to me. "I thought you said, one day, that the brides were just bought when they were children. There can't be much romance about that."

"Well, you can put it that parents expect to be compensated for the trouble of bringing up such troublesome things as daughters. Still, there is plenty of romance, as we magistrates know to our cost."

Two fresh musicians came forward and sat on the ground just in front of us. The one put a reed-pipe to his lips, and the other leant over towards him with his hand on the outer ear.

The ladies were full of excitement, which changed to disappointment, and finally boredom, as the love sonnet progressed. The musicians began respectively to blow and chant in a very low tone, as if one were murmuring a secret to the other. They continued blowing and chanting almost on the one note without taking breath, and the sonnet appeared to end only when one or the other gasped for wind.

Undaunted, they took breath and started off again on another note, but the foot-race was finishing and claimed all our attention.

Here occurred what in England would be re-

garded as a regrettable incident, but was nothing considered by our countrymen.

At the finish, a youth who had not run the course suddenly nipped in from the crowd and raced home with a fine sprint, followed by an admirable piece of acting, descriptive of the distress of the honest runner. It was satisfactory, however, to see that Sher Mahommed, who was one of the judges, soon had him out and drove him off.

Now came the four-mile race, the *pièce de résistance* of the programme.

The people are horse-masters and horse-lovers to a man. Bahadur Khan had come down, bringing with him a famous black mare, of which he and Sher Mahommed owned two legs each, and the excitement was whether she would beat the Chief's own grey. There were other competitors, but money has a habit of counting here as elsewhere, and only these two were reputed to have a chance.

They thundered round once and twice, and still there seemed nothing in it. A washy red roan clung to the leaders till the second round ended, and then dropped steadily backwards. The favourites were left to fight it out, and pounded round, locked together.

Several times during the afternoon we had noticed that the last bend of the course looked unpleasantly sharp, but so far all had gone well. Now in the growing dusk the rider of the black, as he was gradually creeping to the front, lost his head in the excitement and failed to swing round quickly enough. The mare appeared to be coming dead on to the

marquee, but the jockey managed to make her swerve at the last moment. She thus missed the first tent-rope, but, tearing on, crashed against the farther peg. Down she went, the rider thrown clear on to the sandy soil.

I had been so intent on watching the race, and now on seeing that the man picked himself up more or less unhurt, that I had hardly realised any danger to our party, until I noticed Vickers standing elaborately in front of Barbara. Looking round, I saw that Vernon and Humpie had disappeared and that Mrs Benson was hurrying out to the back of the marquee.

Barbara and I followed her, and found Humpie there in Vernon's arms.

"I hope you were not upset," he said apologetically to Mrs Benson. "The chair he was standing on was knocked over, and there was such a surge back of the native gentry that I thought it best to lift him out," and, while Mrs Benson thanked him gratefully, he went on to Barbara. "I could see you were all right, but I had to look after my chum. He is only a small man after all, and, as it was, he got a little knock, but he is very brave."

"We might have had the whole tent on our heads," said Vickers.

"I think," said Benson, laughing, "that we probably should have, only that Mallik Massu caught hold of the rope. No tent could fall against a weight like that."

As no harm had been done, the festivities proceeded, and it was Benson's turn now to give away the prizes both to the competitors and the musicians.

Till then the energies of the various bands had known some limit, but now reed-band, gourd-band, and string-band competed inharmoniously against each other. At last, however, they were made to desist when a fourth band appeared, consisting of a man with a huge drum and another with a squealing pipe, a remote connection of the bagpipe.

This clearly was one of the star items of the programme, because all the Balochis crowded up, and the ring round the musicians grew and grew, until it attained huge dimensions. Round and round the Balochis paced in slow time to a four-step tune, clapping their hands at each beat, and turning alternately to their right and left partners.

Then some one led off with a love-song, which was gradually taken up by all. The pace increased by degrees, and the singing gave place to a sharp nasal hissing. The clapping redoubled, and the posturing gathered fresh abandon. Now the dancers would all, simultaneously, sink on their heels, and now they would gyrate in comparatively slow time. Occasionally a couple would separate themselves from the circle, and within the ring would commence fresh antics and grimaces of their own.

All good things must have an end, and Mrs Benson was anxious to put her little son to sleep after all the excitements of the day. We therefore rose and went off after further compliments and good wishes on the part of our host. Humpie, in spite of Vernon's hurry to his rescue, was not quite his bright little self after the fall from the chair, and was glad to be carried back in Vernon's arms.

Benson and I took Barbara and Vickers to see the Homeric hospitality to which our chiefs treat their retainers upon such an occasion.

Scores of cows and hundreds of sheep and goats had been slaughtered during the day, and their meat simmered now in earthen pots over long trenches full of fire, whilst stout cakes baked in strange primitive ovens. The tribesmen, great rough simple fellows, ate heavily like the heroes of old, and told each other what a fine fellow their Chief was, and, incidentally, what fine fellows they themselves were.

As we assembled for dinner, the Chief with his friend the Maulwi came, followed by attendants bearing a portion of the cooked meat and the heavy loaves that are baked round red-hot stones.

"Here is wedding feast," said the Maulwi; "the Chief has brought you meat and bread, and hopes you will partake of them."

"Isn't it strange to think that here we all are feasting at a marriage, and not even the ladies of the party have seen the bride nor heard her mentioned?" said Mrs Benson.

"When I marry," said Vickers, in a tone that suggested that the time was near, "I shall see that my bride enjoys everything," and his glance rested unmistakably on Barbara.

The Maulwi was talking to Vernon, and interrupted his conversation to remark—

"With us girls are not much seen. When *you* marry, Vernon Sahib, God send you many sons."

CHAPTER XX.

THE RIGHT MAN.

ONLY a short time now remained of our pleasant river tour, and we journeyed on down the stream, enjoying to the full the sport that the Indus and its banks provided: sometimes more, sometimes less, but always something, and varying incessantly from crocodiles to quail, cranes to snipe, and geese to sand-grouse.

We had done much and seen much. Another kind of pelican, the Spotted Bill variety, had fallen to a well-directed rifle-shot of Benson's, and stirred by this, we had bagged two geese out of a large flock quite unapproachable by shot-guns.

On our last morning we had betaken ourselves to a swamp four miles from our encamping-ground. It had been a pleasant shoot in which mallard and teal, gadwall and white-eye, scaup and pochard, were nicely intermingled with the snipe of all three kinds, while a solitary stiff-tailed duck had increased our list of varieties shot on the tour to thirty.

"How stupid of Vickers to miss such a shoot," said Benson, as he and Vernon, very delighted with

themselves, moved off to another piece of water. It was arranged that I should wait till they reached it, in the hope that the birds they disturbed would come back to me.

After a pause I made for a bushy dwarf tamarisk growing out of the mud at a bend that promised the easiest shooting. On reaching it I was disgusted to find that the bush, which looked compact from the distance, was most straggly and thin in reality. I found that, if I stood too near it, my vision was hopelessly blocked by projecting branches; while if I stood clear, the birds were likely to see me first.

A happy thought struck me, and I scrambled on to the bent trunk that lay half embedded in the mud, a manœuvre which appeared to promise great success. I walked along the trunk, and, taking up my stand in the front, was waiting for the birds which had now been stirred by the distant firing.

Suddenly I glanced downwards.

There is something about a black cobra up against one's heel, even though one is wearing the strongest of waterproof shooting-boots topped with leggings, that gives the stoutest heart a qualm, and about ten years had elapsed since I had seen a live snake out of a charmer's hands. However, the gun in my hand cheered me, and, ignoring the oncoming wave of duck, I fired down at the brute and crushed his head out of shape.

This settled all question of duck-shooting, for the flights simply streamed off to the river. It was no use to wait longer, and I joined Nawab, who was

holding my chestnut, and explained what had happened.

He took it philosophically as a Mahommedan.

"A black snake seen in the morning is a good portent."

"It would have been anything but a good portent for me if I had not seen it in time. But perhaps it augurs good for others," I replied. "Now I must bolt back to work."

Leaving Nawab to bring the bag home, and to search for strange medicinal parts of the dead snake, I made off.

About a mile from camp my course lay in the bed of a creek, dry except for a pool here and there under the bank. The moisture below made the going good, and I went at top speed the whole time.

Suddenly the sound of English voices reached me, and, rounding a bend, I found myself just below Miss Waynfleete and Vickers, who were riding on the bank above.

"Of course, take time to think it over," he was saying complacently.

If I had wished to play eavesdropper I could not have done it more successfully. The tell-tale proximity of Vickers, and his choice of a ride with Miss Waynfleete when the rest of us were shooting, left me in no doubt as to the meaning of the words. Having shirked the tramp round the marsh, he had induced her to go out for a morning ride, and, it appeared, had taken his chance of making his proposal.

He had evidently just spoken, and his face wore the look of smug self-satisfaction of one who has stooped to conquer. The idea that any girl would refuse him, the great Superiority, Mr E. St John Vickers, would not enter his head, and I don't suppose the existence of Vernon occurred to him in this matter.

"But, Mr Vickers——" began his companion.

By this time I had pushed my pony up the stiff bank to get on the path for the camp.

There was nothing for me to do but to pretend brazenly that I had heard nothing. After all, I had been going hard, and might not have caught any portion of the conversation.

"Hullo! Miss Waynfleete," I said. "Out for exercise? But you should not have kept Mr Vickers from joining us. He doesn't know what he has missed this morning."

"Oh yes, I do," he replied curtly.

But Miss Barbara, whether she wanted time to make up her mind or for some other reason, did not let me go ahead and leave her to complete her conversation with her escort. So we all three cantered in together.

By the time Benson and Vernon had joined us the sun was in full strength, and after breakfast, as we drifted down to our last stage at Kot Khatta, we came on reach after reach in which the fish-eating, long-nosed crocodile abounded.

Every sportsman knows that he sees too often in imagination that which he has gone out to see. All down the tour there had been straw crocodiles,

log crocodiles, and brushwood crocodiles in abundance. The real articles are always unmistakable, and the living Saurians with their long heads cocked at a different angle to their bodies, showing a white throat when end on, were quite distinguishable, when they did occur, from the other similar objects that lie on the edge of the ooze.

Many as there were on this day, both Benson and I were in our usual state, in which the sport of the morning was taking its revenge in its congested work.

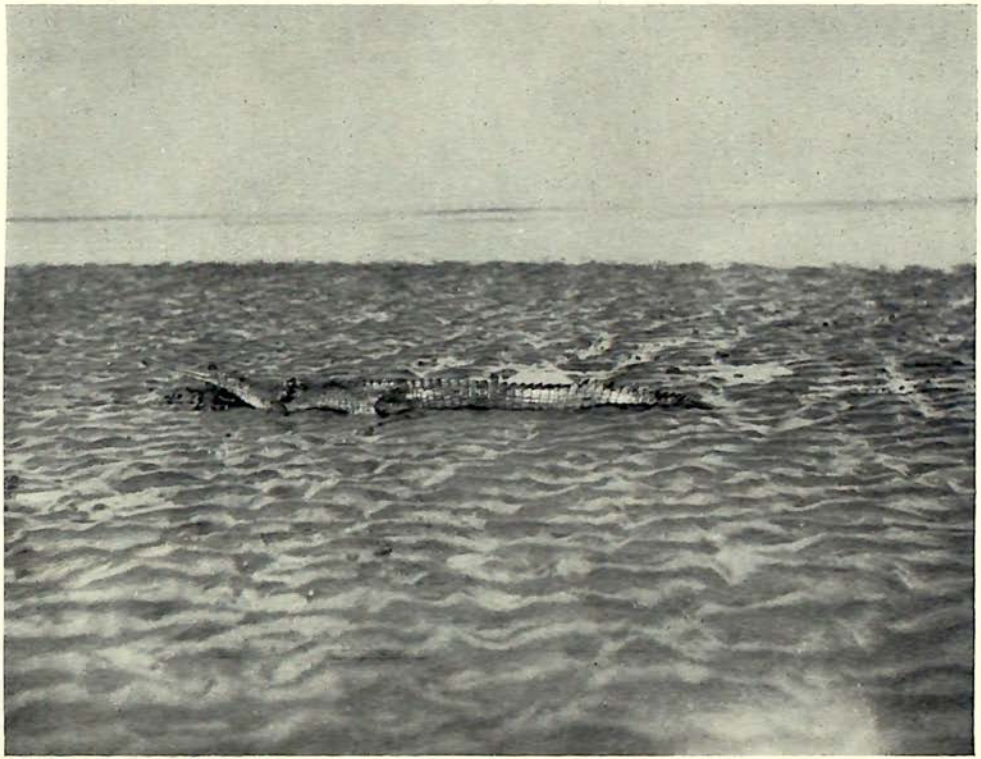
He went off to his cabin in his own boat, and I remained surrounded by work in mine, both of us merely getting the chance of a far-off long shot from the main stream.

Vickers had made some suggestion after breakfast to our young lady of going on the roof, but she replied most firmly—

"Certainly not; I could not think of allowing you to waste a moment of the last day on the river. You must get all the sport you can."

Vickers probably felt too sure of his answer, when it should come, to wish to hasten it, while Vernon, whatever his own wishes may have been, courteously accepted the fact that she seemed to want to be alone. Accordingly they both went off, Vernon in the canvas boat and Vickers in the Dreadnought, thus getting closer to the crocodiles than they could have done otherwise.

The ladies and Humpie remained on in my boat, Mrs Benson busy with some embroidery, while Miss Barbara, to whom the river creatures were a per-



A crocodile on a mud-bank.

petual delight, had borrowed my battered copy of 'Hume and Marshall's Game-birds,' whose delightful letterpress and amusingly frank criticism on their own coloured illustrations always entertained her.

"Dull on the river!" she said, in answer to some chaff of her brother-in-law's as he went off. "Not a bit of it."

Was there not among other things her photography! Never a day passed without some addition to her picture-gallery. Now a great country boat in full sail before a spanking breeze; now a comic-looking camel-man with a beast laden like a Christmas-tree, a Hinks lantern hanging like a locket from the curve of its neck; now Dick or one of the rest of us starting off in the little boat, armed to the teeth for slaughter.

"Lucky the man who marries her," I thought. "She has the heart of a child, and the vivid interest in her surroundings that is the secret of life and companionship."

On this particular day, however, she seemed, not unnaturally, abstracted and thoughtful. Once or twice when I passed the window to crouch on the prow for a shot at crocodile I saw her with the open book before her, looking dreamily out over the water.

It was a crocodile day, and, as luck would have it, the main stream lay in a comparatively narrow channel for a time, while both the younger men were exploring the innumerable branches into which the river was broken up.

I heard Nawab tell the boatmen to cease rowing,

and, knowing what that meant, was clambering along to the bows almost before the last splash of the oars died away.

Seven long brutes were lying on the edge of the flat, just where the next bend came. I loaded and waited patiently.

A little nearer, and I drew a bead on the largest beast, but while I looked it softly and silently faded away.

The older they are the warier they get, and one has to decide whether to take a long shot at a big one or to hope for an easier chance at one younger and simpler. The target, however long, is always low.

Warned by this, I picked the next in size, and, once the fore-sight had something definite to rest on, I pulled without waiting longer. The crocodile threw up head and tail once, and lay quivering, but I sent him another round behind the shoulder from an easier range before allowing the men to row in. I knew from past experience how the brutes can lash themselves into the water with eel-like vitality however hard hit they may seem.

All his companions had, of course, thrown themselves off the mud with the first shot, but they could be seen, with only goggle eyes and the tip of the nose visible, cruising like submarines round the mud-flat, waiting their chance to bask again.

My victim was finally got on board; I returned to my work, and down-stream we went again.

Late in the afternoon Vernon returned in the

A dead crocodile.

Dreadnought, having changed boats with Vickers in order to bring back their joint spoil. I did not see him until he climbed into my cabin at the back of the boat, as the curtains were down on that side to keep off the sun, and because he had overtaken us from the side channel in which he had been amusing himself.

Muttering something about the sun, he started to wash and change.

Meanwhile I heard Barbara say, "Come on, Humpie, let us go on the top now."

"I don't think he had better go just yet," demurred the fond mother. "The sun is stronger and stronger every day now."

"Well, I will go alone for a little while first. I shall be all right with a big hat and covered sunshade. I do so love looking out across the water."

Miles was evidently preoccupied, and said nothing of his bag, although it turned out that he had secured two crocodiles, with a goose thrown in. He had clearly been upset by the knowledge of Vickers' morning ride, although he did not know even as much as I did. He completed his toilet, getting out of his knock-about costume, and was standing, half-hesitating in the cabin, as if wondering whether he should join the girl who was all the world to him, when a shot rang out in the distance.

I seized my field-glasses automatically, and, looking out, saw that Vickers had shot a crocodile.

I watched him land, and saw him, assisted by the boy, get the reptile into his crazy canvas craft,

and start back in the direction of our boat. I turned again to my work, but was hardly immersed in it when I was startled by a cry from Miss Waynfleete.

"Oh Miles! Miles!" we heard her say, in queer strangled tones.

My eyes leapt to the lad, who stood for one brief moment transfigured as a flash of revelation rent the dark clouds of his doubt.

What had happened he knew not, but at last he saw face to face. It was the hour of his victory. His love had come.

And with a sigh, half pain, half joy, the boy was gone.

I looked at the river for enlightenment, and amid my regrets for Mr E. St John Vickers I smiled to myself.

Vickers' boat was floating bottom upwards, upset by one of those galvanic movements which a crocodile is apt to make long after you imagine him to be dead, and Vickers and his boy were in the water.

But Miss Waynfleete, *without field-glasses, did not know that it was not Vernon.*

I jumped into the Dreadnought and was off in a moment.

Vickers was already out on the sand-bank by the time I reached him, and there was never any fear for the boy, who, like all riverain people, could swim like a fish.

"Very good of you to come so promptly," said

Vickers pompously, "but I am a pretty useful swimmer. I shan't see that expensive battery of mine again, though, I am afraid."

I helped the dishevelled sportsman, whose stylish clothes dripped Indus water into the Dreadnought, and rowed him back to the two vessels which had stopped together against a high bank.

Mrs Benson and Dick, followed by Miss Barbara and Miles and every native on the boats, pressed forward to commiserate with Vickers for his mishap.

It was a full stage, he evidently thought, with himself the hero in the limelight, and he determined to do justice to the situation.

"The crocodile seemed as dead as a door-nail, when suddenly it woke to life again and started lashing about," he was saying. "I did what I could to keep the little boat steady when——"

At this point he suddenly realised that Miss Barbara's hand was on Miles' arm, and his story stopped abruptly.

He realised somehow that he had lost more than his guns.

The race is not always to the swift. He was beaten,—he the brilliant, the self-confident,—beaten by slow, diffident old Miles, and there was no getting over it.

With a crestfallen remark about the necessity for changing his clothes he made a bolt for his cabin.

"Poor Mr Vickers," said Mrs Benson softly to me; "I believe he cares a lot."

"M' yes," said Dick, but, placing a hand affection-

ately on Miles' shoulder, "Barbara has chosen the right man."

Husband and wife departed, and I turned in to the next cabin, leaving the sweethearts alone.

"Lucky Miles," I sighed, and drew from my office box the tattered old leather case that holds the miniature of my dead love.

THE END.

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